

BEYOND
THE



SILVER
RAINBOW

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Beyond the Silver Rainbow by AmyVanHym

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Summary: A search for Jonathan. 'Fear wasn't all bad. A little fear could be good for you. Maybe it was sort of like medicine, like plant food for love.' [Complete. Post-S1 canon divergence. Steve/Nancy/Jonathan, Mike/Eleven. Most main characters appear. Body horror, some violence. H/C, UST, friendship.]

1. one

"At first the witch was tempted to run away from Dorothy, but she happened to look into the child's eyes and saw she had a simple soul. The little girl did not know of the wonderful power of the Silver Shoes. The Wicked Witch laughed to herself and thought, 'I can still make her my slave, for she does not know how to use her power.'"

— L. Frank Baum, The Wizard of Oz

"One of the highest pleasures is to be more or less unconscious of one's own existence, to be absorbed in interesting sights, sounds, places, and people. Conversely, one of the greatest pains is to be self-conscious, to feel unabsorbed and cut off from the community and the surrounding world."

— Alan W. Watts, The Wisdom of Insecurity

"I wish to paint in such a manner as if I were photographing dreams."

— Zdzisław Beksiński

1.

Mike heard Nancy sniffing as he walked to his room after brushing his teeth, so he approached the glow at the crack of her bedroom door. She sobbed dryly to herself, crying more quietly than he thought normal girls ever did.

"Nancy?" Mike put his eye to the light. His sister lay on her bed, facing the window and curled up in a ball so all he could see was her bony back and stringy hair. "...Nance?"

"Go away."

He wanted to. He was only trying to be nice and she was acting like a jerk. *So Steve dumped you already? He could have said it. You didn't make out with him as much as he wanted you to so he found a new girlfriend, right?* "Nancy, come on."

"Michael, screw off!"

No wait, I bet it's the dragon breath, that's why he dumped you. I should tell Mom and Dad so they can ground you again for never brushing your teeth. Grounding her hadn't worked so they gave her special flavored toothpaste that smelled like bubblegum and Mike had never been allowed to have any. Sure it was a million years ago but it still sucked.

He took a deep breath. They couldn't fight anymore. Nothing was the same anymore. He held tight to the doorknob and kept his fingers clear of the edge in case Nancy might launch up from the bed and try to slam it in his face, like that time she'd almost busted his nose over a missing (firecrackered) Barbie head. "We're supposed to tell each other everything now, remember?"

"No we're not. We were supposed to when we were still trying to find Will and Barb, but now Will's back and Barb's gone forever so if you would just *leave me alone please.*"

"You don't know Barb's gone forever. She might be—"

Nancy roared her frustration and bounced her bedsprings. Afraid she was coming at him, Mike kicked the door open and held out his hands to defend himself, but through his cringing squint he found she wasn't there. She wasn't even on the bed. She was gone. What if that yell had been—Oh no. "Uh... Where..."

"I'm down here, stupid. Close the door."

On the floor, Nancy's wiggling feet stuck out from behind the far side of the bed. Her pale pink socks were splattered with dried mud and the soles were brown. Mike closed the door until it clicked.

"You can come in but don't look at me," Nancy said.

Mike leaned on the curly white frame at the end of the bed and put an elbow over it. "Why, did you grow a third eye or something?"

"I've always had a third eye. It's how I know when you come in here and take my stuff."

"I don't take your stuff!"

"You took my dress for your girlfriend."

Mike decided not to let the word bother him. His heart was still thumping a little too hard from that dumb scare a minute ago and he didn't want to give it anything else to wig out over. "Lucas found your dress in the basement. And you didn't know we took it until you saw her wearing it so I know you don't have a third eye."

In her hiding place beside the bed, Nancy took a big, shuddering breath. "Jonathan has a third eye, in a way."

"Huh?"

"But now I have it."

"You... What? You're being weird."

"I found it on the side of the road."

"You found Jonathan's third eye on the side of the road?"

"Basically."

"Nancy, are you on drugs?" Mike leaned over to see her laying on her stomach with her head in her arms. "Did Steve give you drugs? Is that what's wrong?"

Mike thought Nancy had started crying again from the way she shook, but then she sat up, wiping her face with fisted sweater sleeves, and despite her red blotches and puffy lizard eyes she was smiling. Maybe almost laughing. "No you booger, Steve didn't give me any drugs." She leaned onto her bed and reached under her pillow, then stopped to aim a harsh look at Mike. "Keep a secret? I'm dead serious."

"Of course. I promise."

"Dead fucking serious."

"I promise!"

"He gave me this." Carefully, and with suddenly shivering hands,

Nancy pulled a black and silver object from underneath her pillow. A dangling strap, a tubular lens. Nancy's expression began to crumple, so Mike thrust his hands out and took the camera from her. She immediately folded her arms on the edge of the bed and hid her face in their nest. "Steve bought it for me to give to Jonathan for Christmas because his last one broke." Her voice grated. "Anyway, I gave it to him, but..."

The camera, heavy in Mike's hands, was streaked with dirt like Nancy's socks. It felt expensive. Will's family was poor. He turned it over, inspecting it. The lens was broken, rattling around inside its casing, and the flash was bent to the side. "You found this on the *ground?*"

"By his house. I went to ask him if he's working New Years' Eve and there it was in the ditch. I don't even know how I noticed it, it was so dark. I just felt like I should look there, like my head—Whatever, my head's screwed up, I can't think yet. I just ran home. I'm still trying to calm down."

"Are you sure it's the same camera?"

"I kept the receipt in case it wasn't... I don't know, in case it wasn't right. It's the new one."

"Did it come with a strap too?"

"What? Are you seriously geeking out over this? Who cares?"

Mike rolled his eyes. "If Jonathan put the strap on it himself that means he was actually using it and didn't just throw it away."

Nancy's head shot up. Her anger was hideous. "He wouldn't just throw it away!"

"I know." Mike held out his hand and gestured downward with it. "I know he wouldn't. I'm just saying. I'm just trying to think, okay?" Nancy put her face back into her arms. "It would be..." He didn't want to say this. Puzzles were a lot easier to take than real life, or at least they were easier than what real life was turning into. "It would be better if he had just thrown it away. You know?"

"Yeah." Nancy sniffed loudly. It was gross. "I know."

Mike inspected the strap, wiping mud flakes away with his thumb, and discovered tiny lettering stamped into the leather: *Canon*. He checked the camera: above the lens the logo read *Pentax*. The fear came back again and didn't go away. Instead it spread into his arms and legs, itching and aching, stupidly telling him to run somewhere, anywhere. "The strap is a different brand. He was definitely using the camera."

"In the dark, in the winter?"

"Who knows? It could have been this afternoon. Maybe he had the day off work." Mike tapped all eight fingers on the camera's body in a frantic rhythm. "But he was using it. He was taking pictures." His fingers stilled. "He was taking pictures! Hey, you didn't open the back, did you?"

"I didn't, and it was closed when I found it. But... Mike?" When Nancy lifted her head this time, she looked different, worse than upset: her tearful grimace had relaxed to hopelessness. "We already know what took him. There's another thing out there. Even if he got a picture of it, so what? We know what it looks like. We know what happened."

"No we don't."

"We know what happened to Barb."

"No, we don't. We know what happened to Will."

Nancy smiled a tiny little bit, the sort of smile old people saved for kids they thought were being cute.

Mike glared at her. He was not being cute. "If he didn't just lose the camera by accident, if something... got him, we'll probably have to tell someone so they can go into the upside down and find him, which is dangerous, and if we hand this over for evidence we'll never see it again. And for all we know we might be freaking out a ton of people for no reason. You want to do all that without knowing for ourselves exactly what he saw?" He held up the camera and shook it for emphasis. "Without seeing through his eye?"

Nancy clapped her hands to the top and bottom of the camera. "Then don't wave the thing around, you'll trip the catch and expose the film."

"Okay, so. I have no idea how to develop pictures."

"I have an idea. He showed me once, but..." Nancy crunched her eyes shut, froze for a brain-racking moment and shook her head. "I can't. I don't have all the details. I was too worried about Barbara."

"Do you know anyone who could help?"

Nancy dropped her gaze. "Shit," she murmured.

"No?"

"Yes. She's just not someone I want to talk to."

"Can you go talk to her tonight? Can we go right now?"

"It's after nine!"

"So we'll pretend we're asleep first."

"And it's freezing."

"So bundle up. We'll take my bike and get there fast. I'll double ride you. You're really small for a big sister."

"No, Mike. No. I'm not bringing my little brother to... I don't... ugh." Nancy hung her head. "I hardly know her. I don't even know where she lives."

"Who do you know that knows where she lives? We'll go see them first and they'll tell us where to go!"

"Mike! Would you please back off?" Nancy was wasting time cowering and making faces when she should have been planning. "You're like some kind of... frog... jumping around in my face, some slimy little toad... thing..."

"Toads aren't slimy. They're an entirely differen—"

"Shut UP Mike!" Nancy yanked the camera out of his hands and bundled it to her chest. The hideous burning anger had returned to her face. "You're so— You're just—"

Mike backed away until he bumped into the new TV on Nancy's desk. This was not the reaction he had expected. He didn't know what he had expected. This was exactly what he should have expected. "Sorry," he said. "I get really focused sometimes."

Nancy stood slowly. "You mean obsessed."

"I mean I want to do something about Will's brother before their mom gets any clue anything is wrong! What do you want to do, sit around crying all night like a little girl?"

"I thought you said you were sorry."

"I am sorry. But I still want to do something."

"Sexist twerp," Nancy grumbled, hugging the camera close as if it was her baby and Mike was trying to eat it.

"No. I am not that. You shut up. Elle is way younger than you and she's more grown up than anyone I've ever met, guys included. Whether you're being a little girl or not is in here." Mike tapped his temple. "Come with me. Let's get this done."

"No, *you* shut up," Nancy hissed, clearly wishing she could shout at him. "I am not going to just stand here while my dumb kid brother lectures me about growing up. You have no idea what I've done or what I can do. Don't you dare talk to me like that again. Let's go."

Mike blinked. "What?"

"I said let's go. You go to bed, I go to bed, then Mom and Dad go to bed. Then you get our coats and shoes in perfect silence without waking Holly and come back up here. We'll go out my window and take your bike to Steve's because he knows where Nicole lives. Okay?"

"Uh. Yeah. Yeah, okay. Sounds great." Mike put his hand on the doorknob, then stopped himself. "Wait. Dad sleeps in his chair in the

back room. My stuff's at the back door. I can't get past him. He'll be watching TV 'til who knows how late."

Nancy smiled slyly, squinting her already squinty eyes. "Not since the whole incident when those bigwigs tossed the house," she said. "They've been back in their bedroom for weeks now. Remember Christmas?"

Of course Mike remembered Christmas, it was four days ago. He remembered dragging Nancy out of bed and not letting go of her wrist no matter how many times she swatted him. He remembered pouncing onto the foot of his parents' bed and jumping around as if he was ten again, overwhelmed with a joy that seemed to erupt from nowhere. His parents—both of them—hugged him in turn, while Nancy apologized for failing to rein him in. "Duh."

"One more thing," Nancy said, kneeling beside her bed. She flipped up her pastel bedspread and slid her arm under the mattress. "I'm going to have this on me just in case, and I want you to be prepared if you see it. Don't touch it and don't tell Steve. Don't tell *anyone*."

Nancy had a gun.

"What the fuck!?" Mike said, then covered his mouth right after. "Is it loaded?"

"Not right now, but it will be. Or it might be." Hanging from Nancy's hand the gun looked as dark and heavy as a black hole. She pointed it at the floor and fiddled with it, opening the chamber and closing it again. "It always might be loaded, even when it isn't. Remember that, okay? And don't ever touch it." She stared at Mike, her lip trembling in emphasis. "Never, ever."

"I could handle it if I had to."

"Have you ever even held one before?"

"No."

"Then don't touch it."

"Well how am I ever supposed to learn...?" But Nancy's evil eye cut

him off. He tried another avenue: "Where did you get it?"

"Jonathan gave it to me. It wasn't really his to give away but he wanted me to have it just in case, so... Here it is. Merry Christmas." A shyness came over Nancy in that moment, a ducking of the head, a twinkling guilt as though she had been caught doing something wrong but didn't know whether to feel bad about it.

It must have been Will's mom's gun. Nancy probably knew she wasn't supposed to have it, but this was not the time to bug her to give it back.

"You and Jonathan are pretty good friends now, huh?"

"Yeah." Nancy was calm. She slid the gun beneath her pillow where the camera had been. "We're good friends."

2. two

2.

Mike pedaled so hard down the road that Nancy had to lower her eyelids until they were almost closed to keep her eyeballs from freezing. "You're fast!" she shouted into the wind.

"I've been practicing!" Mike yelled back.

Nancy curled her toes make sure her mother's shoes would stay on her feet as she bumped along on the back of the bike, taking up most of the seat while Mike rode standing. His shoulders made a little seesaw in her hands. His only mistake aside from grabbing her the wrong shoes had been to tear the shoulder seam of his old gray jacket on the way down from the roof, and now, lined with little white threads, it opened and closed as he moved. He was wearing a red shirt underneath it.

Nancy changed channels.

Mom would get better. Her smiles were still like rips in wrapping paper, but Dad was spending more time with her now. They were building a real relationship out of the hidden mess of things, maybe finally getting it that there were some treasures even Tupperware couldn't preserve, no matter how good and clean and under control the container. Fear wasn't all bad. A little fear could be good for you. Maybe it was sort of like medicine, like plant food for love.

Jonathan had never been a cafeteria type—he was more the type to wander around outside eating from a bag—but in late November he had materialized in the back corner of the caf where, once Nancy and Steve found him and the weather really cooled, he began to appear every day.

Their table became a comfortably silent refueling station for a party

of three. It was in the glances a little and in the silence a lot that this wasn't just an understanding, it was a pact: no parents, no mentors, no counsellors, no psychologists, no explanations, no bullshit. Everyone was here, so everything was fine. Nice, simple, case closed.

It was so nice, in fact, that sometimes—pretty often—Nancy didn't even need to eat, she just recharged the ol' intangible trifecta batteries until the first bell severed the connection and ushered her back to a life that flowed by at an arm's length away. Tommy and Carol were not missed, Nicole was not relevant, and Nancy's casual friendships, all of which reminded her of Barbara, froze solid to slip away into an early winter. She didn't even know Kathy anymore.

Cold dots prickled her cheeks. While the weather had warmed just enough the last few days to melt most of the Christmas snowfall away, it had started snowing again. She peeked at the road to check where they were. Clumpy flakes danced in the wide beam of Mike's headlamp, mirroring the atmospheric motes of the poison place. Would she ever enjoy the sight of falling snow again?

"Your next right," she said.

"What?"

"We've got to make a right, up here."

"Oh, okay."

A racking shiver emerged from the core of Nancy's spine, making her fight to keep her balance. Between the sense of helplessness, the choice of transportation and the slightly too-big shoes, she felt exactly like a kid in disguise. Steve would be a comfort, assuming he wouldn't kill her for getting him in trouble by showing up so late. It was already way past ten and Nancy wasn't the one who normally did the showing up.

Hey, wanna have a movie night after the game? Hey, Dave's cat had kittens, let's go see them. Hey let's go throw some stones in the quarry, I'll show you how to skip 'em—okay, then you can show me how to skip 'em. Hey, it's the Benny & Friends grand reopening today, you hungry? Hey, I got an idea, lets go running—I dunno where, like around. Running's the

cool thing to do now. Let's just run.

Steve had given her a TV and a VCR for Christmas a month early, and a few nights each week, behind an adamantly locked door in the dark, they retreated into film and beat their bad memories to ribbons until his curfew. And it worked—it actually *worked*—because this wasn't denial, it was a rhythm of gently persistent hypnosis, maintained in the knowledge that Hawkins probably still had invisible cancer but *Hey, let's pretend. Disbelief suspended until further notice.*

The only place in Nancy's room where the new TV could fit was the top of her studying desk. Unwilling to let her grades suffer, she had accepted the painful reality and put them to sleep. Steve celebrated her first B with a ruler-thin bottle of pilfered ice wine, passed between them. No glasses. *It's not like you're any less smart now*, he said when it turned out she was in mourning. *It's just that sometimes there are better ways to prove it.*

"Help me out." said Mike.

"I know." Nancy leaned into the turn with him and they came out of it smoothly. "D'you think I've never been on the back of a bike before?"

"I've never seen you."

"You've never seen a lot of things."

"Har har."

The wind was quieter on this winding road, buffeted by the dense evergreens lining the street. Mike had begun to huff and puff. "We almost there? My lungs are getting frostbit."

"Actually yeah. Right after this curve, you should see... Yep. The pool."

Mike braked a little too hard. "Is that steam?"

Behind Steve's big grey house, an endless silver mist wafted up high and dissolved into a TV-static sky.

"Uh huh."

"They heat their pool all through the winter?"

"I think his parents might be crazy."

"If by crazy you mean rich," Mike said, creeping their vehicle to a halt with his handbrakes. "Like really, really rich. Wow. I've never gone swimming in the winter. Outside, I mean."

"I don't think today's your day." Nancy hopped onto the road.

When Mike bent to lay his bike by the curb he stayed there, searching the ground. "Too bad," he said absently.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for stones. Tiny ones. Which window's Steve's?"

"Holy shit, what happened to you?" Steve drew Nancy up into his arms and squeezed her so tightly she squeaked. "Why's the kid here? All that—that freaky business is over, right?"

"It's probably nothing," Nancy said, but a new tear tsunami had begun looming the moment he opened one of his front doors and now the wave crashed over her as hard as any other.

"It's *not* nothing," said Mike.

"Simmer down, little bro." Steve's voice hummed against Nancy's ear through his sweatshirt. When he shushed into her hair she allowed herself a single sob and swallowed everything else, because if she let this emotional mess go on any longer she would end up subjecting him to a whole lot of crap he didn't deserve. He had already made up for everything. She wouldn't drag him through any more confusion than she had to.

"What'd you do kid? Didja—"

"I didn't do anything."

"—punch your sister in the eye?" Steve leaned back to take Nancy's face in his hands and stroked her temples. "Both eyes? Because that's what it looks like." He quieted, just for her: "I know exactly what this looks like."

The weaker part of Nancy nearly crumbled to the stoop. "Do you know Nicole's address?"

"Nicole?" He cocked his chin back and dropped his hands. "You mean Carol's friend?"

"Stephen, what is this?"

Steve's eyes lost their focus. "Heya, Pop."

"Are you standing there with the door wide open in the middle of winter?" Mr. Harrington spoke in hushed tones and yet he boomed, as though he only lowered his voice because that was the most efficient way to roll it down the stairs. "We are not heating the outdoors."

"You are too," Mike mumbled. Nancy shot a foot back to kick him into silence, but only brushed his leg. He said "Ow" anyway.

"Sorry, Pop."

"What the hell are you doing? It's past eleven! Trying to sneak another girl in here in the middle of the night? Your mother is going to blow a gasket!"

Another girl? Nancy launched her eyebrows up at Steve. He spun around as though the look had made physical contact and scratched at the back of his head.

"I'm not trying to sneak anything."

"Oh, I can see that! You've got a lot of nerve, Stephen, an abundance of nerve and less shame every day. Close that damn door for Christ's sake!"

Nancy, who had been slowly leaning in to get a glimpse of the looming figure she still hadn't met, found herself instead pushed steadily away by Steve's patting hands. "Just—one minute. Don't go

anywhere." He guided her a step backwards. "Hold on."

"Wait." Mike jumped forward as the door swung closed and stuck his foot in the gap, where it bumped his shoe before it could fully shut. "Like this," he whispered.

Nancy was about to pull Mike away when Steve, blank faced, said "K," and turned back to his disgruntled father. It seemed the invisible man hadn't noticed.

"—more I try to guide you straight the more boldly you swing the other way, *any* other way. And you don't seem to care which way, as long as it isn't my way. Can you explain that? Explain it to me. Explain why you think it's acceptable to throw another surprise party when you should be studying."

Nancy flicked Mike's ear. *This was a terrible idea.*

Mike shrugged. *Not my fault he has a jerk for a dad.*

Together they leaned in to listen.

"There's no party. I didn't even know they were coming."

"They?"

"She has her little brother with her. He's like ten years old."

Mike was offended. Nancy tousled the snow from his hair.

"Oh, of course! Since, thanks to you, this is the house known statewide as the place to go when kids want free liquor and a free swim, here they are."

"I don't know why they're here. I think they just want to talk."

"I am not running a public house. You watch yourself. Nobody 'just wants to talk' to the rich kid in town, Stephen. You would do well to get a grip on the concept of pretext. Just as you would do well to grasp the concept of *study*."

"Oh give me a break—"

"Don't you dare raise your voice, young man."

Nancy and Mike shared a look. The guy was a total mean-dad cliche. They were hearing in seriousness the sorts of things their own parents said in jest.

"What do you expect me to study during *Christmas break*?"

"I expect you to study the mountain of information that flew by your pickled brains last semester, you boozing lowlife. No son of mine brings home straight Cs. No son of mine will bring home even one single C ever again. Do you understand me?"

Mike's teeth had begun to show, his eyes to water. His foot! Steve had forgotten about it and was leaning on the door without thinking. Nancy placed her palm on the door. Mike shook his head at her really fast: *No, it's okay*. Nancy pushed a little bit to save him some pain anyway.

"Yes, I understand you," Steve said. He sounded like a different person—one who had already heard all of this many times before.

"Do you understand Hardwood?"

"Yes, I understand Hardwood," Steve recited.

"Six months." Mr. Harrington's feet creaked heavily up a few stairs.

"So can I at least talk to them?"

There was a long pause. The door bounced against Mike's foot. He peeped a grunt of pain and immediately it began to swing open. Nancy caught the knob to hold it—gently—in place.

"You have twenty minutes. Use the garage."

"Thank you," said Steve. His father's steps grew distant, then silent. In the exact same tone he mumbled "Fuck you," and opened the door, carrying an uncharacteristic hunch in his shoulders. He looked from Nancy to Mike. "How's your foot?"

"It's fine."

"Meet me around back."

"Yeah, sure," Nancy said. Steve shut the door.

What was Hardwood?

"Your boyfriend's dad is such a dick," Mike said, as Nancy led him past Steve's car in the driveway and back to the rear of the house, climbing through a few crunchy snow drifts that hadn't quite melted. "If I was in your place, I mean if I were you and I was a girl, I don't think I'd want to marry Steve. He might be a cool guy and all but you've got to think of the future. His dad is not grandpa material. Would you leave that guy alone with your kids? I sure wouldn't want to be alone with him. He'd cancel dessert over an elbow on the table. Why haven't you told me to shut up yet? Hello?"

"Sorry, were you talking?" Nancy had heard him, distantly, without really thinking about anything he was saying.

"Nope, just singing to myself."

Hardwood. Nancy pushed the high gate all the way open until it touched the wall. *Six months.* She toed the brick stopper in front of it to keep it open, just in case. *Lowlife.*

Through the mist floating up from the swimming pool, past an upturned snowy deck chair, the door at the backside of the Harringtons' attached garage opened to blackness. Then the light turned on, cutting a bar of gold from the fuzzy grey-black night, and Steve emerged with a baby blue blanket in his arms. "Here," he said, wrapping Nancy up.

"What's this for?"

"You're shaking. Did you guys bike here in the snow?"

"Yeah, we doubled," Mike said. "Got here fast. I've been practicing."

"Parents don't know you're gone?"

Nancy shook her head.

Steve guided Nancy toward the door with an arm around her, but she moved reluctantly. She hadn't realized how cold she was, and now she shook and shuddered as if the subtle warmth of the blanket was drawing it out of her. She was so tired, she just wanted to sit down, and if she went inside there would be a place to sit down, but she couldn't afford to sit down. "I have to talk to Nicole," she pleaded.

Mike waved his arms around. "Can I have a blanket too?"

"On your left." Steve pointed into the garage and Mike ran in. "So... hey." He rubbed heat into Nancy's shoulders. Her teeth chattered. She swore they had only started chattering just now. "What do you want with an airhead like Nicole?"

This was the moment to tell him about Jonathan. No, this was the moment to show him the camera. No, this was the moment to stomp her foot, demand an address and refuse to explain. She couldn't do any of it. "What's Hardwood?"

"Nuh-uh, you first."

"And then you'll tell me?"

Steve expelled a lungful of mist, searched the sky and casually plucked an answer from it. "Sure. Why not."

Nancy entered the garage. The far side was occupied by a sports car with a silver-grey cover over it, which slanted down in front so that it looked vaguely like a shark. A stripe of red peeked out the bottom. Tools and pool equipment lined the walls of the nearer side, surrounding an old fraying easy chair and a sofa with a knitted throw draped over the back. Mike was sitting in the chair, wrapped in a Kermit the Frog bedspread, tossing a can of beer between his hands.

"Michael!"

"Relax, I didn't open it."

"Hilarious, kid." Steve snatched the can from Mike and held it out to Nancy. "So you're another one who uses full names when pissed off, huh?"

"No." Instead of accepting the beer, Nancy pulled the blanket off her shoulders and shrugged her backpack down to her forearm. "I have to show you something." Except she couldn't grab the zipper with her numb, shaking, stupid fingers.

"Hey." Steve stuck out his lip, then his hand. "I got it. Trade?"

Nancy handed her backpack over with knitted brows, took the beer and instead of opening it, hugged herself. Steve began unzipping. Nancy couldn't watch. She turned away, pulled the blue blanket back over herself and sat on the far end of the sofa with her chin on her knee. The can of beer lay abandoned in the crevace between the cushions beside her.

"The hell is this?" Jonathan's new camera hung like an exposed corpse from the strap in Steve's hand, its tangled flashbulb tilted at a grotesque angle. "I can't believe it. No wait, yes I can. I should have known that asshole—this cost me—I was trying to—" Steve rolled his eyes, shaking his head in bitter incredulity. "What did mister psycho stalker do, take a hammer to it in front of you? Or was it a baseball bat?"

"No!" Mike shouted. "He wouldn't just throw it away!"

"Oh yeah what do you know, Kid Retard? You think you have any clue what—"

"Do you even know my *name*? Nancy, your boyfriend's a bigger jerk than his dad."

"Mike!" Nancy wobbled.

"Well he is," but the force of Mike's conviction had left him.

Steve seemed to shrink. "Yeah, I am," he said softly. "Sorry, Mike. Listen, your sister and I have to talk. Why don't you..." He deposited the backpack and camera on the sofa on his way to a shelf behind it. Nancy, crouching, turned on cushioned ballerina tiptoes to watch him as he dug into a neglected pile of brown towels. "Why don't you go for a swim?" he said. A pair of navy swim trunks sailed through the air, drawstrings flapping, and landed on Mike's arm.

"Seriously?" said Mike, his eyes wide.

"Yeah, seriously. No cannonballs or my dad'll knock both our heads off in one swing, got it?"

Mike jumped up with the trunks in his fist, nodding earnestly. "I'm a ghost," he said.

"You can change by the car. Don't scratch it."

"Totally. Thanks Steve," and Mike may as well have disappeared.

Nancy looked down in surprise. Jonathan's camera had made its way back into her hands and she hadn't even noticed. She held it close.

Steve draped the crib-sized Kermit blanket around his shoulders like a cape and flopped down onto the middle of the sofa, bouncing Nancy up and down. She reached over and pet Kermit's nose with the backs of her fingers. "Was this yours?" she asked.

"Pff, what do you mean was it mine? It *is* mine."

"I mean when you were a kid."

"I still am a kid, whatever happened before. So are you." The beer snapped open and hissed in Steve's hands, startling her. "Sort of."

"Thanks, but I'm not really in the mood. I don't want to get drunk right now."

"Fear of being naked is not the only thing this takes the edge off, you know that. I'm not trying to get you drunk. I'm trying to get you to stop shaking. We'll share. It's the only one I have anyway." Steve took a big gulp and this time when he held it out, Nancy accepted it. "Why don't you tell me what climbed up Byers' ass so we can do something about it?"

She told him everything, wetting her mouth with small nervous sips between sentences. She told him about the tentative plans for some kind of multi-family New Years' Eve party, the long peaceful walk to Jonathan's house, the way an instinct or the wind blew her toward that tiny little glint in the frozen ditch before she got there. She

backtracked into places she loathed to tread—the dying deer, the slimy habitat to which it had been taken, the shrinking doorway that Jonathan had just barely pulled her out of—while Steve, rapt, finished most of the beer himself. Then she jumped ahead to Mike's discovery of the differently branded camera strap. She was perfectly honest about every fact and perfectly secretive about every feeling. Almost every feeling.

"Jonathan's a really good person," she finished, having dented a long crescent moon pattern into the leather strap with her nail. "He is same, and smart, and... *gentle*."

Steve scoffed, but a look proved it was mostly in good humor.

"You weren't there when I gave this to him. You haven't seen how he is with Will. And I mean, if he wanted to be resentful or jealous or something he would sell it, or trade it in for a different one, not throw it away. He couldn't afford to throw it away. It's too valuable to lose."

"Assuming he has no pride," Steve said, rubbing his jaw. "So now you want to bug Nicole because she's in the photography club?"

"Right."

"I don't think she has a dark room at home, Nance."

"Well, whatever. She can tell us what to do. Maybe she has the chemicals, or a book. Anything."

"You're forgetting she's also an airhead. Why don't we just go to the cops?"

"Because they'll shut us out. They tried to shut us out last time. We had to steal our own equipment back and trap the monster in secret. That's why we were alone in his house when you found us." Nancy played with the lens, tried to straighten it within its casing, gave up and found reluctant sympathy in Steve's eyes. "Mike is right. We need to know what's in this camera. We need as much information as we can get before we tell the police."

"Did you even call the guy's mom?"

"Their phone doesn't ring. The last time Will was over to see my brother he told my mom they're taking a break from phone calls until the new year. I guess they want some peace and quiet. Anyway..." Nancy took the beer from Steve's hand to steal the last (flat and kinda gross) sip. "Hardwood."

Steve swatted at his ear as though besieged by a mosquito and looked around the room, the turn of his head following an invisible yet riveting menace. "Mumblarycool," he said.

"What?"

"You know." He broke into a coughing fit. "Mistle," he hacked into his hand, "Mistlewarey school."

Nancy nearly choked for real. "*Military school?* Your dad is sending you to military school?"

He shrugged, frowning. "I don't know why you're so worried. There won't be any other girls there."

"Steve!"

"I've still got a whole semester to fix my grades before he registers me. You can help me study. You're even familiar with my learning style. It'll be cake."

Nancy put on her sceptic hat. "Your learning style?"

"Strip studying: the fastest way to straight As."

"So when you said your dad was a 'grade A asshole,' you actually meant it?"

Steve was taken aback. "Huh. I guess I did. How did you even remember that?" He leaned in, dominating Nancy's field of view. "The girl's got a photographic memory and a beautiful voice. I'll just lay around listening while she tells me everything I need to know and then I'll ace every single test. I'm telling you: cake."

Nancy shut her eyes and sighed. School didn't work that way. Before she could say so Steve was kissing her, sliding his fingers up the nape

of her neck, tonguing the seam of her lips with the gentlest persistence, but she put a hand on his collar, kept the kiss chaste and ended it with a deep inhale and a savoring smack. It felt good to smile again. It also felt guilty. "We've already been here too long. We need to get Mike out of the pool and—Aw crap, wet hair on the bike? It'll kill him."

"So I'll drive. Nicole's around the long corner from Jonathan's place, lucky us. She's the one we get—we *got*—all the..." Steve was in the middle of regretting this sentence. "...Byers stories from."

Byers stories, as if a family could be reduced to a situation comedy. Nancy shook off her disgust. "Your dad's okay with you going out?"

"Nah, but so what? Screw him. Things to see, people to do. I'll make—" Steve's eyes bugged.

Nancy's heart crashed into her legs.

Mike was screaming.

3. three

3.

Mike tiptoed past Nancy and Steve, who were discussing a lot of things he already knew about, and stepped outside. The cement was a sandpaper ice cube under his bare toes. The swim trunks were way too big but the drawstring saved the day, bunching the band around his waist like a deflated inner tube. He shivered as he crept down to the shallow end: the mist was cold, the air was cold, the snowflakes melting on his arms were cold. There was no way the water could be anything but cold too.

Mike stuck his foot into the pool. It felt like a bath. His Christmas joy swelled up within him, threatening volcanic meltdown. He chomped on his lip to stop a laugh, then sat down on the pool's edge to control his cannonball impulse. He splashed his fingers in the water, where they waved impossibly in the light-bending ripples, backlit yet dull and distant through the mist. He held up his hand. It smoked, as if he had dipped it in dry ice.

"Cool."

He wished the guys were here. And Elle. She could float away to a whole other galaxy in this pool—a galaxy with a nicer planet than Earth, where the people based their constitution on the Jedi code and whose national food was just like pure Eggo pizza with maple syrup sauce only good for you, where things were always right side up except in stories. How much salt would that take? Like forty tons. At least.

Mike slipped into the pool and started walking toward the deeper end. This was awesome, the biggest bathtub ever, but he had no idea what to do. Splashing wasn't allowed, there weren't any pool toys, he couldn't make a whirlpool all by himself and he had no one to play Marco Polo with. Treading water was boring. His feet glowed big and

blue in the underwater lights, waving silently to keep him afloat.

That was it: it was silent under the surface. Down there no one could hear him. He could do whatever he liked. He pinched his nose, kicked himself up for momentum and dropped, enjoyed the momentary warm weightlessness whose familiarity he couldn't quite name, then paddled back to the surface and caught his breath. On his next drop he pretzeled into a sort of improvised diving position and swam along to the other side the way a snorkeler would pass over the Great Barrier Reef.

At the deep end Mike surfaced, grabbed onto the edge and, emboldened, dove nearly straight down. When his elbow scraped the bottom he kept his breath. He kicked along, rising up the slope like a sea snake or a crab, as far as his lungs would let him go plus a little more than that for practice, and surfaced, gasping, near the shallow end. He had made it almost all the way across the whole pool underwater. Impressive.

Mike kept practicing, lap after diving lap. Eight laps. His head was getting fuzzy, his eyes chlorine-sore and his ears achy from repeated pressure changes. With one hand he held on to the end of the diving board and bobbed in the water.

Falling snowflakes raced each other downward through the steam. One after another he spotted them and silently encouraged them to touch the pool's surface before the rising heat could melt them away into nothing, but only a few made it. Only a few were big enough. The rest got nowhere, and there was nothing they could do about it.

He startled: a shiny black lump had gotten stuck to his scraped elbow. A leech? Leeches lived in lakes, not swimming pools. He imagined it sucking his blood and, shuddering, reached over to pull it off, but before he could grab it the lights went dark.

The pool blinked empty.

His guts balled up into his throat as the diving board slipped from his grasp.

Mike's bare feet slammed down through a sponge and the extra

momentum threw him to his knees, toward a bloated face with bulging brown eyeballs and a long, living, alien black tongue, a head wreathed in clumps of rusty hair and mucous spiderwebs. Tentacle vines strangled a grey, undead world. He thought of Elle.

The lights flickered back on and pressure needled his eardrums. He nearly inhaled water. He flailed, found a semblance of his bearings and kicked upward.

Gone.

Halfway back to the surface it all flickered out again and dropped him back into the nightmare.

Mike hit bottom with his hand square on the dead face. The force of his impact tore the flesh away from the skull so easily it could have been held on by vanilla pudding. An eyeball rolled over his fingers. More black leeches squirmed among the newly bared teeth, shrinking back into the mouth in response to the sudden exposure. Mike stopped thinking.

The return of the water pulled an explosion of bubbles out of him and he swam up again. The water dropped him for only a flash, returning to catch him before he could land.

Mike reached through the water for his elbow and missed.

Lights out, he fell.

Mike's brain told him he would land on a giant spongy Eggo instead.

Lights on, he swam.

There was no way to know when it would be safe to breathe.

Lights out, he bounced onto the other end of the sponge pile, puffing up a sulphuric garbage smell. Those big eyeglasses tangled in the webbing by his leg were familiar, sickeningly reminiscent of a handful of chance meetings and a corkboard in Nancy's bedroom. He grabbed on to them and, dry heaving, ripped them from an amalgamation of decayed brown corduroy and elastic paper snot.

Mike risked a breath, crept his free fingers to the slimy lump on his elbow, closed his eyes and waited for the light to come back. Two breaths, three breaths, in and out, and he held it. The instant the water's bright warmth touched his cheeks he yanked the leech from its sucking place, pushed off the bottom with all the strength left in his legs and swam up.

He was going nowhere. It was the longest swim of his life. When he surfaced he gasped only as much air as would allow him to scream again, and once he started he couldn't stop.

"Nancy! NANCY!" He tried to pull himself out of the pool at the nearest edge, climbing with his knee up over the side, but with Barbara's glasses clutched in one hand he slipped so forcefully that he launched backwards into the pool again.

He gasped beneath the water.

The world narrowed to a pinhole.

Mike was drowning.

A pulse shoved him in the deep, and something—a tentacle, a vine, an arm? He didn't care—coiled around his chest from behind. Bruising claws under his armpits hauled him up to sit in the dry where a girl was squeaking his name a million times in one long word. A rock thunked into his back and he almost threw up.

"Any time, man."

The rock came back as a boulder and Mike puked a waterfall, then wheezed in all the air he could, and puked a stream, and kept wheezing. His chest and his nose were full of dry ice, burning and freezing him at once.

"Mikemikemikemike..."

"Nancy?" Before Mike knew it he was crying. He might have started crying before he started drowning.

"Mikemikemike..." Nancy clutched him to her chest as though he was Jonathan's camera, rocking him, and although he was sobbing,

gasping, choking, losing his mind, Mike stared into the pool, searching for the leech. It was still in there, somewhere. Hiding. Waiting to take someone else.

"We have to go," came Steve's grave warning from above. "If our parents find out about this it's all over. Ambulance, questions, cops. Happy New Year Hardwood. I'm dead. We're dead. I'll get—" He sprinted away.

"Nancy?"

"What happened?"

Mike held up the glasses in a deathgrip. "I know what happened to—" he coughed"—to Barb. She's in the pool. In the upside down. In the pool. It's not alright. I know what happened. It's not alright and we can't fix it." Barbara's face split apart in his mind, and when it was over it split apart again. Another coughing fit came over him, suffocating him in realization, in despair, in life rolling natural snake eyes for no good reason at all.

"I know," Nancy said. Her voice had steadied. "Eleven told us. It's okay. I know." She unfolded Mike's fingers from the glasses and took them away. "Thank you."

"What the hell is going on out there? Your time was up ten minutes ago!"

Mr. Harrington's voice was coming from inside the garage.

"Nothing! Nothing's going on. Just driving everybody home."

"Why are you soaking wet?"

"I fell! Slipped. Ice I guess. I'm fine. Time to go home everybody! Come on, let's go..." Steve fled the garage carrying a tangerine duffel bag. He fired it at Nancy with a basketball pass and it landed on the ground by her feet. "Let's go," he said through clenched teeth, beckoning with outstretched hands. "You get the bag, I got the kid."

"Where's my backpack? The camera?" Nancy said, as Steve scooped up Mike the same way Dustin had scooped up Eleven the night she

disappeared—then threw him over his shoulder.

"I got it, come on." Steve lumbered toward the open gate, jerking Mike around and shouldering his gut so that he coughed up even more water. He felt disgusting. He wanted to go to bed. Or to a doctor. Or to his mom. He landed in the back seat of Steve's car and flopped onto his side. Nancy slid in beside him and pulled his legs onto her lap. Steve closed her door, then looped around to the driver's door, got in, and started the engine.

"Wait!" Mike shouted, jumping up onto his elbow.

"Can't wait." Steve shifted into reverse and threw an arm around the front passenger seat, craning to see behind them. "We're going."

"NO! Steve. There is a black leech in the pool. It stuck itself on me and it took me to the upside down. It is still in the pool. It is still alive."

Steve stared at Mike, his face fish-blank, an unlit cigarette hanging from his mouth. His outstretched arm slowly recoiled. "I should kill that," he said.

"Please do," said Mike, exasperated. Steve left.

"Don't tell me the camera's in here," Nancy groaned, searching the duffel bag on top of Mike's legs in her lap, "The way he threw it—I should have taped it shut. Where is it?" The Kermit blanket flew out as fast as a prank snake from a can.

"Leggo my legs." Mike sat up just in time to see Steve, through the windshield and the open gate, knocking a pool skimmer onto the patio. A little dot fell out. Steve stepped on the dot, jumped back a second, then slammed down on it with a murderous, grinding heel. He wiped the mess from his shoe onto the patio as one would a clump of dog crap and made his way back to the car.

"Where is it?" Nancy's searching grew frantic. "Where is it?"

"He's wearing your backpack." Mike fell against the cold window. He coughed a mess onto the floor of the car. "Whoops."

Steve returned to the driver's seat.

"My bike!" Mike realized. "Road!"

"You gotta be..." Steve backed the car into the road, stopped, shifted out of reverse, turned forward, slammed on the brakes, got out, slammed his door, threw Mike's bike into the trunk and slammed that too, bouncing the car like a carnival ride. When he got back behind the wheel the eyes in the rearview mirror belonged to some kind of animal.

"Thanks," said Mike. "I mean it."

Steve dumped a fistful of dry clothes into the passenger seat, closed his door softly, then reached back and placed Nancy's backpack beside her before he started driving again. He accelerated at a normal rate.

"Thank God. I mean," Nancy cleared her throat. "Thank you Steve." She opened her backpack, looked into it and threw herself back against her seat. "Thank you."

"Yeah, you know, whatever. Stuff." Steve emitted a lunatic chuckle. "Would you guys gimme a minute?" He searched the seat beside him with a blind hand, then lit his cigarette. "I need to drive. A while. Around."

Nancy pulled gifts from the duffel bag in silence: Mike's red sweater, his coat, his jeans with his underwear still in them, his shoes with his socks still in them. No towel. No big deal. He put on his sweater and coat, looked at his jeans, and looked at Nancy. *Awkward*. She held up the Kermit blanket by the corners to make a privacy curtain between them. His cough nagged him while he finished changing.

Steve slapped the car's heater on to full blast. "It screamed." He stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray beneath the knob. "Squealed like a pig when I stepped on it. You ever heard of a screaming leech?"

"Crazy," said Mike.

"Is it..." Nancy looked at Mike as if he knew anything. "Are *they*... reproducing?"

"It had a little flower mouth and everything. At least I think so. I'm not sure." Mike's voice dwindled away. Sometimes his brain made things up under pressure. His breath rasped. This cough was going to nag him the rest of the night. He rubbed his arms and leaned over so more of the warm air from the front would land on him. His elbow stung.

"You shouldn't have killed it," Nancy said darkly. "It could have taken us to Jonathan."

"No," said Mike and Steve at once.

Nancy did not argue the point.

Steve made a hard left and rolled the car to a stop at the far end of the closed Fair Mart's parking lot. The cab's overhead light came on. Steve ruffled his hair in the mirror, then struggled out of his wet shirt and flipped a dry one around in his hands. Nancy was watching all of this with her face pink and her lip in her teeth.

Ugh. Mike snarled at her and coughed really loud to jar her out of her... *Ugh*. It didn't work. Instead Nancy held the Kermit blanket up again, not to separate Steve from the rest of the car while he changed, but to hide Mike as she had before. "Ugh!" Mike put his hand on the door handle and waited for even one kissing noise, but only a period of quiet bumping and a rustle of fabric followed.

"Um, Steve? About your pool..."

"Huh?"

"It's Barb. She's... in there. Mike found her body." One corner of the blanket fell. "He brought these back. The monster killed her." Nancy's voice pitched up. "Barb's dead. We know for sure now."

Steve yanked the blanket through the gap between the front seats and balled it up in his lap. "Yeah?" That animal look had come back. He stared at the fractured glasses Nancy was showing him, but he didn't take them. "How the hell can Barbara be in my pool?"

Mike would have helped Nancy explain but he really didn't want to talk about it.

"In the other version of your pool. In the same place but... On the other side." Nancy wore the expression that came with trying to pull a splinter out of someone's hand. "Is this... Are you, um...?"

"That's shitty," Steve said. He turned around, threw open the glove compartment and started searching through it.

Nancy's lip wobbled only a moment before she got ugly. "Do you even care?"

Steve didn't say anything, just kept searching. A rain of playing cards trickled from the compartment and flapped to the floor. Nancy's eyes saucered.

"Please don't fight," Mike said.

"Do you even *care*, Steve?"

Steve found whatever it was he had been looking for and turned around, fast. "I am all out of care right now, Nance! I used it up!" He raised his fist, opened his palm to the roof, "Pkfff," and sprinkled his fingers downward. "Reserves empty. Give me a break here." He held up a smallish flat plum-colored box. "Barb's honor." He searched Nancy's eyes. "It's okay. They don't bite."

Nancy leaned forward and sniffed. "What is that?" she asked. Mike could smell it from where he sat, sweet and sour, and heavy. "Cigars?"

"Cigarillos. Stale's better than nothing, right?"

Nancy took one. Steve held the box out toward Mike, but Nancy batted at his hand and he rescinded the offer before Mike could say *No thanks*. Nancy leaned toward the lighter, blinking in the brightness with the flaking miniature cigar at her mouth, but then she stopped. "Barbara would hate us for this. She hated smoking."

"Fraid the glove box is all out of scotch," Steve replied.

"She would hate that too."

Steve killed his flame and sighed. He collected Nancy's cigarillo and

dropped it, along with his own, back into their box. "What wouldn't she hate?"

"I don't know, a... prayer, probably?"

The three passed an awkward look around the car and held a moment of silence.

4. four

4.

Jonathan had been laying on his side in the dark, lost in his first ever listen through The Clash's *Sandinista!*, when his camera's flash went off. It branded itself onto his retinas before he even realized his eyes were open, transforming his night blindness into a wakeful white panic. He waited for the bitter adrenaline to filter from his blood but there was no point. Full alert. Moment ruined. He flung his headphones down onto the bed. Mick Jones became an ant in a tin can.

*Someone lights a cigarette
While riding in a car
Some ol' guy takes a swig
And passes back the jar
But where they were last night
No-one can remember
Somebody got murdered
Goodbye, for keeps, forever*

He pinched the bridge of his nose and rubbed his eyes. It would be nice to be able see again sometime before the end of his life, because now he had to take a leak and a blanket of dirty clothes topped with a crunchy crust of neglected LPs lay between him and the bathroom. Wishing he could blame someone for this, he reached for his lamp and turned the switch. The light came on as normal with no flickers but he still couldn't quite see.

Damn it. The first listen through an album was sacred. When he had unwrapped *Sandinista!* Christmas morning, best for last by Mom's decree, hours of bliss had stretched out before him. *This is a triple album. It must have cost you a fortune.* But *Nah*, said his mom, crinkling her nose. *It was the same price as all the others.*

Now all of it was tainted, maybe even ruined. It wasn't so much that he would have to start at the beginning and listen to it over again, since he expected to wear most records out eventually. It was that when he did start again his experience of the first few songs would be affected by familiarity, and then the extra groove run into his mind by the repeat would undermine the virginity of the rest of it. Not to mention the groove run into the record itself, a little tragedy of diamond-tipped vandalism done in sacrifice for every single play, dulling the peaks and valleys of the aural spectrum—but only for the first few songs this time around. Unless he let Side B run its course, the microdamage done to the record would be uneven. For keeps. Forever.

Jonathan didn't normally care—he couldn't when his other-other hobby was making mix tapes—but he had really been looking forward to this and he hadn't quite settled back to his baseline yet. He still checked the locks five times a night, still toe-walked through the house sweeping his hands along the walls afraid they would breathe, still put his ear to bedroom doors afraid they wouldn't—but the locks stayed put, the bedrooms breathed and the walls didn't. Every time. Maybe it was better to let the record be uneven, then. In defiance of a vestigial coping mechanism Jonathan lifted the needle, stopped the turntable, and let it be.

His camera watched him from the nightstand, as innocent as one of his own limbs. It sat on top of a dense book that he wished he hadn't asked for for Christmas and knew he would never open: *The Complete Cthulu Mythos and R'lyehian Glossary*. He picked up his camera and shoved the book off the table.

Turning the camera in the light from the lamp, he peered warily into the flash bulb. It seemed fine. A pull of the lever actually advanced the film instead of moving loosely with nothing to do, and the shutter count read 17, an odd number. He never left it on an odd number.

The camera had taken Jonathan's picture. By itself.

Okay.

He was not obligated to care about this. Most of the time he didn't care much anyway, except when he really, really, really cared, and

that was a pain in the ass, so no. Forget it. No caring. He got up. He navigated the minefield. He made a U-turn. He took a piss.

The motion of zipping up afterward lurched his stomach, forcefully reminding him why he'd been laying around all day saving the best of his albums for last in the first place: he had woken up feeling terrible. It was a sort of nausea, now returning, which intensified until he was sure he would be sick, but then nothing happened. He had been carried through the cycle nearly every hour since morning, its episodes peaking with a clawing need to upchuck a balloon full of cement that just wouldn't come, before the sensation faded into airy relief. Throughout the day each period of relief had gained a stronger tinge of dread than the last as it became ever more apparent that this frustrating nausea would return again later.

So he had been hiding in his room all day, alternating his pillows at the window so he would always have a cool one, keeping this annoyance to himself even when his mom rapped on the door to offer some food that he didn't want. *You haven't been eating much the last few days. I know it's hard but we've got to keep eating—right? Everything's fine now. It'll get better. It always gets better.*

I'm still stuffed from Christmas dinner. No seriously, I think I've got some sleep debt to pay back. Don't worry about me.

But of course Mom had worried. He heard her soft socks building static charge up and down the hall carpet once in a while, and in the evening she took her sleeping pill early for a lay-down on the sofa. She lay there still, her intermittent snores playing bass percussion to the blips and beeps of Will's vigilant Atari.

Leaning on the sides of the sink, Jonathan studied his waxy face in the mirror. He had already tried sticking his fingers down his throat. It didn't work. Whatever this bug was, it was suppressing his gag reflex. He patted himself hard in the chest. No change. Woooziy he returned to his room and lay down on a warm pillow to wait for it to pass.

His mom had lectured him once, after a splotch of blood in the bathroom sink informed her that his impacted wisdom teeth were severely infected, *Don't you talk about not wanting to worry me. You*

know what worries me more than anything in the world? Secrets. There is nothing worse than secrets.

They'd had to forward the dental bill to his father.

The nausea slithered away into the dark, leaving a grateful inner sunshine behind it. It would be gone for good this time—it had to be. There was no other choice. Invigorated and sick of music for once, Jonathan grabbed his camera, passed by the *Pitfall*-enraptured Will in the front room and made it out into the fresh air unnoticed and dressed for the weather.

His first deep breath soothed him as coolly as a shot of Pepto Bismol straight from the refrigerator. He looked out at the wilderness with no idea what he would photograph, which was normal. Either he would find something, or "Something'll find me."

The flash went off again. The shutter clicked with it.

"I take it back," he mumbled, pulling the advance, frightened and laughing at himself. It was probably a loose catch under the shutter button, or a poorly wound spring. Factory defects tended to reveal themselves with mild usage, just as you started getting used to having a new toy—but the prospect of asking Nancy about the warranty made him want to open it up and figure out how to fix it himself. *Hey Nancy, you know that not-really-a-present you gave me? I broke it.* Or worse, *It was broken when you gave it to me. I need a new one.* Not happening. With luck the coverage details would be in the manual.

May as well start walking and use up the roll. He went left, squashing the leaves he had never gotten around to raking up, and onward around to the back of the house, eyeing the treeline for a dark pattern to balance against the three-quarter moon's pearly cloud blanket. He disabled the flash, held his breath and took his shot.

The flash went off after he lowered the viewfinder from his eye. It wasn't supposed to go off at all. He slid the flash out of the hot-shoe, tested the weight of it in his hand and studied the sync contacts. The moonlight revealed nothing out of the ordinary. Were the batteries messed up? He slid off their cover and took them out.

The grass around his feet flashed neon tan.

Without a trigger, without power, without any touch to the contacts, the flash had gone off again. Mentally scorched, he dropped it, stared at it, picked it up off the ground, put the batteries back in, dropped the cover, found it, put it in place over the batteries, slid the flash back into the hot-shoe and stayed down, breathing. The excitement did not agree with his stomach.

"Okay, you tell me where to go," he said, feeling crazy, pointing the camera ahead of him as he crept back up to a standing position. He ducked out of the strap so he could hold it at arm's length from his body. "This is a compass now. Morse code will look like a monster if it doesn't burn the bulb out, so please don't try that." He swallowed on a churning sensation. "You'll just have to take me somewhere."

Jonathan planted his feet firmly and began a steady turn, pivoting at the waist. "Say when," he said. *One, two, three o'clock, four o'clock rock.* The camera took another picture at six o'clock, pointing him back toward the road in front of his house. "Great," he said, following the tentative instruction with hurried steps. "When do I stop?"

His camera stopped him by taking a picture of the dirt road, then turned him three o'clock down that road, toward the centre of town. He walked for at least a full minute. "Do I just keep going?" he asked. Only the old song stuck in his head offered an answer:

*We're gonna rock around the clock tonight
We're gonna rock, rock, rock, 'til broad daylight
We're gonna*

This was idiotic. He was probably following the random sputters of a trashed mechanism, spooked to all hell with a fever and stupid from not eating. His camera dangled at his side. Stupid. He turned around to head back home, and it immediately took another picture. The next round of Camera Clock Compass pointed him toward town just like the last. "I am mentally unwell," he told the darkness, trudging on with the camera pointed ahead and a terrible impulse accumulating in his legs. "I'm okay with this."

The flash began to shriek in R'lyehian morse code.

He spun. The frenzy of light limited his vision to a few yards in every direction, pulling the wide wilderness in toward him while blinding him to the threat. He threw the camera away and cried out in instant regret as the flash strobéd a silver arc through the night. It disappeared with a distant crack.

Jonathan remained blind. He stumbled aimlessly, a cork of white panic in an endless black sea. "Where is it?" he spat. "Where are you this time?"

Silence.

Silence.

Nothing.

A pop reverberated just below his ribcage, as if a big knuckle had cracked inside his stomach. It didn't hurt at first. Then it was acid. Then the acid caught fire and the fire grew to an inferno.

The moonlight went away. The air thickened. A stink rose to Jonathan's mouth, of old rotting matches, of shoveled roadkill and compost. It was the stink Nancy had showered away that one night he slept in her room to keep her safe, to keep them both safe. "Not here." He could barely speak. "Please not here. Anywhere but here."

The inferno became an nuclear reactor. His legs stopped working. He fell stiffly to his hands and knees in a shocked prelude to rigor mortis.

"You've got worms." The hallucination was distant—no, muffled and small. Tonally flat, yet feminine. "I need them." It wasn't a hallucination. She was right here.

"Help," was the only thing Jonathan could say.

A phantom pressure pushed into his torso. There was a wriggle by his heart, a rising blockage of his windpipe as the presence squeezed his esophagus like a tube of toothpaste. Then it released, and the blockage slipped back into the depths.

"I'm sorry." The girl's voice had lost some of its passivity. "They're

smart."

Jonathan lay on his side with his head on his arm, drooling onto the road. "What's smart?" he breathed, his throat on fire. "What's happening?"

"One!" cried the girl. She hit the ground near his head. "I just need one!"

The phantom blunted, socking him in the gut once, and on the second go it went out the other side and up through his throat, bringing the inferno with it. He spat clumps of burning bile onto the ground and the girl scrabbled around in the mess he made, a homeless orphan collecting dropped change.

The embers in his stomach took an aching nap, and from their ashes thirst awoke. "Water," he said. "Do you..."

A kids' plastic water bottle touched down in front of him, with Darth Vader's helmet printed on it. He reached for it but it was taken away and replaced with another: Yoda. "This one."

Jonathan sat up and squeezed a shot of water into his mouth, reluctant to take too much. "You're Eleven," he croaked. He had overheard his brother's friends talking about her many times in the present tense, implying she was still alive. He had doubted them.

"Elle," she said. "Not Eleven." She pulled her gas mask from over her face to rest it on top of her head, catching it for a moment on the pompom of her pink knitted hat. She wore an oversized down-filled pink coat over her pink dress and long dark pants underneath it. Over the coat she wore a backpack. From one of the shoulder straps dangled a dull flashlight, their only source of light. She was filthy.

Jonathan stared at her, wiping his face with his sleeve, while she unscrewed the black lid of the Vader bottle. She opened her hand over the wide mouth, scraped her palm and fingers off on the rim and replaced the lid. She squirted some water from the Yoda bottle onto her hand and wiped it down her skirt. Then she looked at him. Was she waiting for him to say something?

"Where did you get all this stuff?" he asked.

"Dad. Not Papa." Her eyes held the gravity of this distinction. "Dad."

"Someone visits you here?"

"No. Mailbox." Before Jonathan could ask what she meant, she stood up and stuck out her hand at him. "Hospital," she said.

Jonathan didn't take her hand, not because she was dirty—everything here was dirty—but because if he did he would pull her down by trying to pull himself up. He made it to his feet by himself, his own body a mountain to climb until he was upright. "Was that you being my compass?"

"Yes."

"You were taking me to the hospital?"

"Yes."

"I still need to go there?"

"Yes."

Terror slipped into the cracks left behind by the urgency of pain. "What makes you think they can help me? How will we even get back to the ...normal?"

Elle didn't answer.

Jonathan shoved his hands into his pockets and looked up at the sky to find that there wasn't one. In its place loomed black emptiness and floating spots. He may as well have been inside the world's deepest cave. "Elle?"

"Yes?"

"Am I dying?"

Elle pulled on Jonathan's arm to get his hand out of his pocket and took it, knitting her fingers between his with precision. "Yes." She

tugged him toward town.

"No, wait." He pulled his hand back, unweaving their fingers carefully, afraid he might crack one of her knuckles. "Wait a second. You said 'worms.' What are those?"

"They eat you."

Dread stuck to his ribs, gnawing at him, starving. He put his freed hand back into his pocket to slow it down, to calm it by swaddling it. None of this made any sense. "Why did you bring me here?"

Elle shook her head. "They did."

"And your plan is take me back somehow. At the hospital."

"Yes."

"Where a swarm of totally unknown alien parasites could explode out of me all over anyone who's trying to help me, which could do who knows what to who knows how many people."

Elle was still.

"Hospitals are where vulnerable people go."

Elle was still.

"I can't go back." Jonathan searched for the words to explain himself further and couldn't find them, so he kicked one of the vines in the road. It exhaled a dense breath of particles at him, which rose as high as his knees, shimmered with the faintest flash of bioluminescence, and dissipated a mile away.

Everything was a mile away. His own feet were a mile away.

"Can't go back," Elle said. She was crying tearlessly, her smooth face twisted into a mask of mourning. Then she swallowed really hard with her eyes closed and forced a little smile. "I understand."

"You do?" Jonathan didn't.

She nodded.

That was that. He looked back and forth, skipping from pock to pock all over the crumbling road, with absolutely nowhere to run. Now what? Sit down and wait to die? Sit down and wait for one gateway to hell after another to open up inside him, consuming a little more of his sanity each time, so that by the time he approached the threshold he wouldn't even know where he was about to go?

"I shouldn't have given Nancy the gun," he muttered.

"Nancy?"

"You know, Mike's sister."

"Pretty," Elle said.

A tearful laugh puffed out. "Yeah. She's pretty."

"Pretty," Elle repeated, but this time her mouth fell open. "Nancy."

"That's... that's her." Something was wrong. Or was it right? "What?"

Elle sprinted down the road toward town, hopscotching over twining roots and gaping pits with a lightfooted grace borne of familiarity. Jonathan tripped nearly every step as he tried to keep up. She was shrinking fast, and the light with her. The weight of the cave pressed down on his shoulders. He watched his feet. He gained speed. The shrinking light maintained its size, then grew.

Alone in the haze Elle stood on tiptoes. She pulled up one knee to make a triangle at her side, and with her arms she slowly mimed a great halo around her head. Then she tried some kind of fancy footwork and fell down, hitting the ground with both hands as if she had fallen off a skateboard. She bounced back up to her feet, sprinted a few steps in Jonathan's direction, and tried again.

She was dancing ballet?

"Hey, what're you doing?"

"Dancing," said Elle. "Duh." Staring into nothing, she hopped up onto

her tiptoes and hugged a big, delicate, invisible ball. She turned a wobbly half-circle before she lost her balance and caught herself with a hard step.

"Why are you dancing?"

"Practice." Elle got back up on her toes, staring. "Fun." She hummed a familiar tune that Jonathan couldn't name until a few bars in: Brahm's Lullaby. This stare of hers was aimed very intently at a very specific and unwavering piece of nothing.

A golden pair of ballet slippers dangled from a delicate chain in Jonathan's mind. "Can you see Nancy?" His throat flexed involuntarily. "Is she here? Is Nancy here?"

"Yes." Elle put her swinging foot down and looked up at Jonathan as though he was a large pet. "Can't go back," she said, firmly.

"Nancy!" Jonathan was the one turning in circles now, impulsive circles, which widened until he looped from one side of the road to the other. "Nancy!" He put his hands on his knees to take a heaving rest as he developed heartburn, having tired more quickly than an old man. He listened. There were no wildlife sounds—no crickets, no frogs, no night birds, and certainly no voices—just a thick blue soup of acrid decay. "I wish I could see her too," he confessed, out loud.

"I have one," Elle offered, staring, waiting for him to approach her. She pulled the Vader bottle from her coat pocket and led him along the side of the road to one of many big trees. The trees along this road seemed much larger than Jonathan remembered them being in the normal. He crouched with her beside an exposed root.

The worm Elle shook from the Vader bottle was fat at one end with a disc mouth at the other, and two inches long. It was pure black, a slimy stream of ink. A wave ran through its body from mouth to tail as it rolled across her palm. Jonathan fell off his feet, clawing at himself with a sound stuck in his throat. His gag reflex slept on.

Elle closed her fingers around the worm and placed her other hand on the tree. A light grew within her fist, drawing glowing red lines between her fingers as it illuminated her blood like stained glass. The

soulless whistling scream of a boiling lobster gave way to the creaking and groaning of the hollowing tree trunk. She opened her fist and blew a puff of weightless motes from her palm, all that was left of the worm. "Can't go back. Just look. Promise?"

Jonathan nodded.

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"Secret," Elle said.

"I understand," Jonathan replied.

He crawled into a tunnel much longer than the tree trunk was deep. Unlike the one he had once pulled Nancy from, it was clean, its walls and floor smooth with a texture of dusty ice, but warm. The aperture at the end of the tunnel, a circle of moonlight, was a faint pearlescent blue. The Hawkins breeze smelled like stale vanilla ice cream. Jonathan crawled faster. Elle's hands closed around his ankles.

Nancy was dancing.

Coming toward him, she fell from a movement into a heavy-heeled trot, strolled a few steps and leapt into a spin with her arms bowed out and fingers splayed. Her balance escaped in the middle of it and, scraping sparse gravel, she fell to one knee. Jonathan clenched his fists but the concern was unwarranted: she sprang up fluidly as though this was all part of the game, skipped a few playful steps and continued her stroll.

Her ponytail bounced. He could see her profile, her ears, her little gold earrings. She wasn't wearing earphones. The orchestra was all in her head. If he called, she would hear him. She would come right to him.

Nancy, I'm right here.

"Stop," Elle whispered, tightening her grip. "Too far."

Jonathan put his face in his hands, but he couldn't get enough air. He

grabbed at the dirt and the dead grass, wedging hard Hawkins mud under his fingernails—the mud of home, the mud of the real world, the mud that was really a torn bedsheet, it had to be. It had to be. A scream was coming from the past, from long before he was old enough to learn not to scream. It would be here any second. There was nothing he could do about it. This was much bigger than he was.

"*Secret.*"

A knuckle cracked in his stomach.

The floor became a wall. Jonathan slid down and out of the tunnel in a freefall. His back pounded against his landing place, knocking his wind out and shaking dry leaves above him before he came to rest in a pile of mulch. Convinced that his lungs had forgotten how to fill again, he curled up like a shrimp, giving the monster inside him permission to do its destruction.

Elle ran to him and fell down behind him. "I'll get it. I'm sorry," she gasped wetly, dripping warm tears onto the side of his face. "I'm sorry! You promised! I can get it!"

The force fingers slid around in there with the nuclear waste, but it was all very far away. They poked at random parts of Jonathan's guts, they triggered muscular reflexes. For a second they arched his spine. It was as though they were lost.

"I can get it!"

Jonathan was exhausted. "I know."

With a precise little flick, Elle got it. She grabbed a hurried fistful of what he expelled into the dirt. "I can show her. I promise," she said, scraping a plastic rim, and ran off.

Without any water to soothe him this time, Jonathan tasted pennies.

How long was this going to take?

Maybe it would be best for Elle not to bother getting any more.

'*Jonathan?*'

Nancy's voice swelled through the mist, chasing and tumbling over itself as it journeyed a thousand trillion miles and canceled out. The distant tree trunk groaned and snapped, bricking its own bark back into place.

Jonathan! Are you there?

Where are you?

Jonathan!

... I'm right here.

5. five

5.

Steve stopped the car on the road in front of Nicole's house. While technically bigger than a trailer, the house was even smaller than the Byers'. It stood upon a shallow hill in a wide horseshoe of bald trees, wearing a tinfoil wreath on the door and four wooden candy canes in the garden.

The gravel driveway was empty. All of the windows were dark.

Nancy caught Mike looking at her and closed her eyes. Yes, she knew what this probably meant. No, she wasn't going to say it out loud. She found her bubblegum lipgloss in her bag, glossed her dry lips and stuck it in her back pocket.

Steve got out of the car and immediately jumped up on one foot.
"Hah!"

Nancy prickled. "What's wrong?"

"Hah! Shit!"

She fumbled with her door for far too long and ran around the rear of the car. "What—"

"Hot shoe, hot shoe!" Steve fell back into the driver's seat, trying to yank his sneaker off his foot without untying it. The sole had a wide black mark on the heel and it was wisping. Nancy fell to her knees and dove for the laces through a chemist's cloud of who knew what.

"Here!" Mike yelled.

Wet swim trunks thwacked Steve in the face just as the shoe flew through Nancy's hands and into the road. He yanked his sock off, wiped the swim trunks across his heel and then wrapped them

around his foot, hissing for a moment. He tipped Mike a nod. "Nice reflexes, Starsky."

In the middle of the dirt road, the white sneaker with the red Nike swish kept smoking.

"The leeches have acid inside them?" Mike wondered.

Nancy didn't care. "Steve, are you okay?"

"The patio's gonna be wrecked." He dragged a hand down his face.

"Are you okay?"

Steve peeled the wet trunks away from his foot, looking at Nancy rather than the wound. "You tell me."

His heel was red, but not blistering, at least not yet. Nancy sighed out her relief. "Looks like it's just a first degree burn. You'll be fine. Try not to walk on it?"

Steve just looked at her, lost.

She combed her fingers through his damp hair. "Stay here," she said. She jogged across the tufty straw lawn and up the two steps to Nicole's crumbling little cement front porch, and pushed the backlit yellow bell. Faintly, it announced her presence to the inside of the silent house. Nancy rocked on her feet, tonguing air through her front teeth.

"There's nobody home!" Mike yelled.

"Shut up." Nancy leaned over the railing to look in the front window. A frayed gossamer curtain blocked her view of everything inside.

"There's obviously no one here!"

"Shut up Mike!"

"Seriously, Nancy..." Oh come on, was Steve about to agree with Mike? "Her dad works the night shift most of the time."

"The night shift?" Nancy turned around and threw her arms down at her sides. "Where even *is* there to work a night shift around here?"

Steve sat on the front of his car with his feet on the bumper, one shoed and one bare. "I dunno, some factory in Cartersville or Eerie or something."

"That's like an hour away!"

"What do you want me to say?"

"You could have told me earlier!"

"And is there any chance that would have stopped you?"

Nancy tiptoed and thumped down on her heels a few times, thinking. No, that wouldn't have stopped her, and this wasn't going to stop her either. "But what about Nicole herself? Why isn't she here?"

"Maybe she's sleeping," Mike said. He hopped onto the front of the car beside Steve. Steve raised a hand to push him off, but then only mimed a shove and dropped it.

Nancy jabbed the bell again, and again. She thumped the door with the side of her fist. She rapped hard with her knuckles, tried the bell again, hammered the door with her palm faster and faster and before she knew it she was trying the knob. Violently.

"Woah woah woah..." Steve stood at a slumped angle beside the porch with a hand on the railing, having limped up and taken her by surprise. He kept his volume very low. "Were you about to break into the house?"

"Sorry." Nancy let go of the doorknob and shook herself, sheepish. "Sorry, that was stupid."

"I'll say. Jesus, Nancy, take a breather." He leaned in. "I know it's been scary but we've got to keep it together for the little guy."

"I'm going to Will's," Mike announced. "His house is just through the trees sort of..." He slid off the front of the car and craned his neck around to scan the woods. "That way, sorta. I'll find it."

"Wha-what? All by yourself?"

"What do you mean, all by myself? Yeah, Steve, all by myself. I'm not a little kid." Mike dropped his mouth open, aiming contempt at Steve. "I'm not ten."

Steve leaned closer to Nancy and through the side of his mouth asked, "How old is he?"

"I'm not even short!" Mike shouted. "What the hell?"

Nancy jumped off the porch to jog back to the car. She passed right by Mike, opened the door and dragged her backpack by a strap along the back seat. "Gonna go see whether Jonathan's home?"

"Yeah, obviously. That and I want to talk to Will."

Nancy fished a little key from the pocket of her jeans, grabbed her backpack by the smaller front pouch, and unlocked the heart-shaped diary lock linking the pull tabs of the double zipper. She took her gun from the pouch. "Are you sure you can show up this late without freaking out their mom?" she said. "Because I can't, and I don't want her to know quite yet. I might be wrong."

"I'm there all the time, it's normal." It had taken Mike about two seconds to get impatient. "Maybe just leave the gun here? Not loaded?"

"Leave the what?"

Well, this was inevitable. Nancy waited. One beat, two beats.

"Oh no," said Steve. "Nah nah, you don't need that again, *Nancy...*"

Nancy didn't feel like arguing. She opened the chamber, grabbed a handful loose bullets from the pouch and began loading the gun, dropping them into place one after another. The guys held a silent argument behind her, swishing fabric and whispering unintelligibly while the bullets clicked home. With the gun fully loaded, she faced them and tucked it into the back of her pants.

"Yes I do need it," she said, looking up at the three-quarter moon.

"There might be another thing out there." She eyed Steve.
"Remember?"

"Monster bear shark," said Steve, glassy. He leaned on the car with his forehead in his hand.

"Mike, if anything comes after you I want you to yell. Scream your head off. I don't care who you freak out, just scream. I'll come. But—wait, don't yell whatever pops into your head. Say 'monster' so I'll know."

Mike bowed a decisive nod. "Shoot it in the mouth. That's what Lucas did. I think it helped Elle."

"Right in the middle of the mouth?"

"Right there. Bullseye."

"Got it," said Nancy.

"Bye," said Mike.

They shared a little smile. It was nice. Mike ran away.

Jonathan heard only the recurring hiss of his own breath through a filter. There were still no night sounds.

"Let's go home," Elle said, sounding sleepy and numb. She pulled the gas mask off Jonathan's face and put it back over her own. "There's no place like home."

Jonathan felt like he was made of stone, but he was sure hadn't fallen all the way to sleep, assuming that was even possible, and he was grateful. Waking from a dead nap would have forced him to realize all over again that all of this was real.

He didn't want to stay with Elle anymore. The tall tales were all true: she could throw people around, she could cross dimensions, she could reach inside bodies and she could dissolve monsters in a ball of dust and light. Jonathan was laying on the ground next to the scariest girl he could imagine. Yet when he got up onto his damp elbows and

looked at her, she only offered him more water while peering at him with a pair of eyes that belonged to a baby.

There was something about baby eyes. Jonathan could even remember a glint of it in Will's eyes: babies remembered where they came from. In a couple of years they forgot. Elle looked like she still knew.

"Where is home?" he asked.

"No place." Her smile was too sarcastic for a baby. "Duh." She stood and climbed through the webbed decay of the forest floor, tearing and squashing with her dull black galoshes, and began to walk down the road—toward Jonathan's house this time. "The no-place, like home."

She had left the Yoda bottle behind. Jonathan picked it up and followed her carefully, his feet a pair of feelers, his knees doubling as shock absorbers. "Did you watch a lot of movies when you stayed at Mike's house?" he asked when he caught up.

"No."

"—Oh."

They walked.

"What is... 'vulner-able'?" Elle was watching him. For clues?

"You don't know the word?"

She shook her head.

"It means, uh..." He thought of babies again, and sleeping people. And hiding. "It means someone who could get hurt."

They walked.

Elle took her gas mask off and handed it to Jonathan, who felt obligated to use it for a while. He guessed they were taking turns now.

Mike checked over his shoulder repeatedly as he wove through the twiggy woods behind Will's house, keeping his direction by the tree-slatted glow of Steve's headlights. Compasses still didn't work around here.

The snow had stopped falling ages ago and little of it remained on the ground. Miniature drifts curled around the bases of trees, outlining their roots in white, and clumps of it gathered in the concave husks of dried fallen leaves. There were so many white lumps, isolated, each waiting to melt and die alone. Mike kicked his way through them with satisfying irreverence whenever he had enough clearing to do so.

A mourning dove cooed far away, strange for winter and even stranger for night time, and then a cloud slid away from the moon. Five steps later, Mike spotted the dark outline of the Byers' shed, and then a window, honey colored, slid into view beyond it.

Will's room was in the front right corner of the house. Coming from the back, Mike went left, to where it was dark and he would be hidden, and tapped his fingers on the glass. If he couldn't be loud he would be annoying.

The bedroom light came on. The windowblind dipped and lifted. Will's round eyes softened from fear to joy and with an open smile he ran back to close his bedroom door. Pushing his heavy old window up was always a struggle. Mike helped him.

"Hey! Wanna be my player two? My mom's been passed out since after supper."

"Is Jonathan here?"

"He would but he's not feeling well. Why? Don't you want to?"

"When did you last see him?"

"Uh." Will was clearly confused. "I dunno."

"Could you go check his room, see if he's still in there?"

"Okay..."

"Trust me, just check."

Will was not gone very long. "He's definitely not here," he said.

For a moment Mike felt like his feet were sinking into the ground.
"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, he left his light on and everything. Maybe he had to work tonight. Is there a late matinee on? I haven't really been paying attention. What do you want him for?"

"My sister's just been looking for him, that's all."

"Oh."

It was time for Mike to go back and give his report, but he didn't want to say goodbye. "I think Elle's dead," he said. The faraway dove cooed again.

Will shrank a little into himself. "Why?"

"She sucks at hiding. Sucked at hiding."

"Didn't she hide in that fort in your basement for a week?"

"Yeah, but she didn't know when to stay there. She came upstairs when we were eating and my parents almost saw her. And she was kinda claustrophobic. *And* there's that time she stole from the grocery store." Mike put his elbows on the windowsill to rest his face in his fists. "I think she's dead, Will."

Beside him, Will stuck his head out the window and looked around.
"How did you get here? Where's your bike?"

"Steve's car."

"What's going on?" Will's voice had gotten very tiny.

Mike hadn't thought this far ahead. He traced the cracks of the

windowsill's peeling paint with his eyes. "I went into the upside down. It's still here. Er, there."

Will wheezed. He looked like he might be sick. "It is?"

"I found a body."

"Like a dead body?"

"Like a dead body."

Will whispered, "Was it her?"

"No! No no no, it wasn't her, I know that for sure. But... I just..." Mike didn't know how to finish the sentence. It hurt to try. Trying felt empty.

"Doesn't she have superpowers? Maybe that's why she sucks at hiding. You don't need to know how to hide if you have superpowers."

Mike picked at the paint, catapulting chips into the dark. Then why hadn't she come back yet? She had used her powers to leave, so why couldn't she use them to come home? *Chip chip flick chip flick*. Why *wouldn't* she use her powers to come home? The Snow Ball was already over, but the next one was less than a year away. Mike uncovered a big patch of bare wood. She could be anywhere by now. Maybe she never really liked him. "Yeah, I guess. She probably just doesn't care." It would be better that way, if she just didn't care.

"How did you get to the upside down? Is... is..." Will's breath jittered through him. "Hn. Is there—is there—another Dem-demog-gogo—?"

Mike sympathized. He hit Will on the shoulder to steady him. "It's cold. Get a blanket, huh?"

"Right! Thanks." Will tore his blanket from his bed, a trick like removing a tablecloth without disturbing a set table: only two of his new comic books slipped off it to the floor. His face swam in a navy mountain of airplane-patterned cotton. "So is there?"

"No, at least I don't think so. I haven't seen one. But in the mouth, y'know, of the body? There were all these..." It was gross to think

about. Mike lifted his elbow from the sill to rub it. "It was this..." His face was curling, and Will was staring. "This... worm, thing. Like a leech. One of them got me."

6. six

6.

On December 29th there were no Christmas lights to be found in the whole of House Byers, not inside nor outside, because all of that was over. They hadn't even lit up the tree that year. Stepping into the elsewhere mirror of his living room, Jonathan wondered if his presence was messing with the television, disrupting Will's game. If the lamps blinked, would Will be scared? Would he even notice? Would the dog bark? Would it wake Mom? Would she figure out what was going on?

The home was totaled. The overgrowth threatening the roof had crept inside in a hundred places, streaming from rotten floor corners to windowsills, from holes in the ceiling to holes in the walls, from an electrical outlet to the underside of a sofa cushion. The kitchen window had been smashed in, its curtain a mildewed flake of skin on the counter.

"I don't think I really want to stay here," Jonathan said, "But I guess everywhere else is worse?"

"Yes."

Elle led Jonathan past the black patches of monster blood in the old carpet and into his own bedroom. The good news: his Evil Dead poster was still on the wall. The bad news: his Cthulu book might still be on the floor by the far side of the bed, although the mess of clothes and LPs he had left in the normal was missing. It would have been nice to take a nap, but more vines had crept in from the heating duct and hugged his bed in a tight grip from head to foot, and if he tried to remove them the room would fill with those spores.

Elle dropped the gas mask on the floor and sat down on the stuffed chair between the closet and the window. It had no growths on it,

and the disintegrating blue-grey carpet in front of it had already taken the imprints of a hundred footsteps.

"Wait," Jonathan said. "Do you come in here a lot?"

"I live here."

A reflexive forearm crossed his groin. "Rl. Really?" Nausea stirred.
"Could you see me?"

"Not much."

"Can you see my family?"

"No. They're being quiet."

"How well can you see?"

Elle pointed her flashlight at the wall. "Only a little. Only sometimes." She raised her other hand in front of it, waving her fingers, projecting a massive spider onto the painted grid at the head of his bed.

"Are there any other monsters around here? Big ones?"

"Not yet."

That sounded promising.

Elle shot him the baby eyes. "Don't worry."

With no bed or chair to sit on, he picked a spot by the wall and sat on the floor. The carpet was damp. "I'll try."

Elle crawled from the chair to her hands and knees and slid halfway under the bed, dragging her dangling flashlight in with her to dig around in amorphously shifting light and shadow. She emerged with a book, but not the Cthulu one. This one was much thinner, and the edges of the pages were wavy from moisture and use. She handed it to Jonathan and sat there expectantly in her bright flashlight halo with her legs tucked up under herself.

It was a copy of The Wizard of Oz. Jonathan opened the hard cover.

Scratched into the top corner in heavy, denting strokes, it read,
There's no place like home. Keep your chin up, kiddo. Hop.

"Dad," Elle said.

"Is that what he said?"

"No. It's what I say."

The Chief left her presents, so she adopted him? "Cute." Jonathan closed the book. He meant it, it was nice, but this place made nice things hard to look at. His eyes were burning so he closed them too.

Elle made a frustrated little noise and bummed her way across the carpet until she glowed right next to him. She took the book from his hands and stressed the creaky spine. "Friends," she said, placing the book in his lap. "Look."

Surrounded by poppies, the cowardly lion slept wearing a peaceful fanged smile. His long curly mane pillowed his cheek upon his paw.

"Aren't you a bit old for this story? This is for little kids and you're, what, Will's age? Twelve?"

Elle stared at him, comprehending at first, then comprehending with a touch of disgust. She thought Jonathan was stupid. "No," she said.

He admonished himself. "No you're right, sorry. You like what you like."

Elle flipped through more pages. "Lucas."

The tin woodman raised his axe over the neck of a snarling wildcat.

She flipped some more. "Mike."

The scarecrow sat on an etched tree stump with his chin on his fist.

"Ohh. I get it. They all remind you of Will's friends?"

"Yes."

"Is Will in there too?"

Elle ducked her head on what might have been a stifled giggle. She pulled her lips into her mouth, biting them.

"What?"

"Secret?"

"Sure."

She flipped the pages until she found an inking of the Oz crew traveling warily through a haunted forest. She tapped her finger on Toto, whose only visible part was a pair of pale eyes peeking out from within the darkness of Dorothy's picnic basket.

Jonathan snorted. "I won't tell him," and as soon as the words came out a deep pit formed in the centre of his chest, and his heart ricoched around in the pit so hard that Elle could surely hear it. He pushed her book aside, drew his knees up to himself, and hid his face in his crossed arms. He wanted to be alone.

"I'm sorry," said Elle.

"It's not your fault."

"It is. You don't understand."

Jonathan shrugged his shoulders up really far and sniffed. "That's fine. It doesn't matter."

"Understanding matters."

Jonathan was at a loss. "Okay?"

Elle left him alone for a while. Although the sound of her movements lost volume drastically within a short distance, he could still hear her footsteps. In the kitchen, a chair squealed across the floor. The refrigerator door opened and closed. The silverware drawer tinkled. Each note was a hammer blow, striking Jonathan with nostalgia for singular melodies he had last heard only hours ago and had taken for granted his entire life.

"Here," Elle said. She held both hands out toward him. In one hand, a spoon. In the other, a single serving cup of chocolate pudding. "Courage."

Jonathan wiped his sleeve across his face. "Where's yours?"

"I have one."

"Won't it feed the monsters?" He pulled at the front of his jacket. "The little ones?"

"No."

"How do you know?"

"They don't like it."

It seemed that was the most thorough answer he was going to get. With nothing to lose, he opened the pudding cup and started to eat it. It was so sweet, in such stark contrast with everything his world had become, that he had to eat it very slowly. Even the smallest bite tried to shrivel up his tongue, but it didn't churn his stomach. He gained a bit more room in which to think, and to speak.

"Why here?" he started. "Why do you live in my house and not the Wheelers'?"

Elle was sitting in the chair nibbling around the bad parts of a partially rotten apple. "Mom's here."

"You mean my mom?"

Elle nodded, chewing. She swallowed. "Music is here too," she added, "But it's quiet."

Jonathan finished his pudding and had an idea. He got up, dropped the cup and spoon on his bed, plucked Elle's gas mask from the floor and put it on. "You might want to stand back," he said. Elle detached her flashlight from herself and placed it in the chair, pointing it at the ceiling to light the room. She moved to the hallway and peeked in from behind the door.

Jonathan grabbed hold of one of the tough flaking growths strangling his stereo and tugged, but his effort threatened to topple the whole cupboard.

"Stop," Elle said. "Loud."

Right. This project wasn't a big boulder to move, it was a big tangle to untie. Jonathan peeled layer after layer from the vines, fraying bark and digging through slimy sap. Clouds of escaped spores filled the room. By his work the growths thinned, broke apart and fell to the floor. He wiped his hands off on his thighs and walked his fingers along his record collection, and found that several—most of his casual favorites, the frequent plays—were missing.

The albums were piled under Elle's chair, left open as books to their printed lyrics. It must have been that for hours upon hours over the last month or more, Jonathan's room had been haunted by a strange girl reading along with the poetry of the greats.

He was about to choose one to play when he remembered how deeply Will had frightened their mom by playing his mixtape, so he rubbed his hand over his brow and devised a plan B from what he could recall of the boys' jumbled stories. He extricated his headphones from the mess and detached the cord. He held them out toward his bedroom door. "Could these help you hear stuff better?"

Elle wasn't there.

Jonathan put his headphones around his neck and brought the flashlight with him into the hallway. "Elle?"

She wasn't in the bathroom, or the living room, or the kitchen. She wasn't in his mom's room either. He pointed the flashlight away and, stealthily, pushed open Will's bedroom door.

Elle stood beside Will's *Jaws* poster, a top corner of which had flopped down from the wall. She leaned forward over the old grey toy chest and put her hands on the closed window, and then her forehead fell to the glass. She stood like that, with her eyes closed, perfectly still, for a long time. Jonathan didn't dare interrupt. He was starting to feel sick again. He thought maybe he should leave.

"Mike." Elle's voice was a little bell in a gust of wind. "No."

"Betcha fifty bucks the guy's sawing logs." Steve was sitting on Nicole's front stoop.

Nancy had begun doing laps back and forth across the lawn the moment she could no longer see Mike through the trees. Her legs itched inside and pacing scratched them. It also kept her warm. She passed by Steve again without looking at him.

"All that stuff with the pool, with Mike, with the bug in the pool, that wasn't enough for one night? You really think Jonathan's gone too? It's too much. Think about it."

"I *am* thinking," Nancy snapped as she passed him next.

"No, what you're doing is worrying. What are the chances of two totally insane but mostly unrelated things happening the same night? Come on," Steve smoothed, "Adventure's wrapping up. Kid's gonna find him in his bed and we'll all go home and go to sleep too. Then tomorrow I'll get my dad to fill in the pool with cement and the next time I run into Jonathan I'll ask him why he's gotta be such an asshole."

"I'm not tired and neither are you." Nancy marched to the pebbly drive and hit herself in the cheek with her ponytail by whipping around again. "None of us are going to sleep after what happened tonight."

"Then we can do something else, somewhere interesting. Since you're out. And I'm out. And I've got the car."

On her way back to Steve, Nancy felt a corner of her mouth turn up without her consent.

"Nancy, couldja—come on, would y—" He snared her wrist by the cuff to stop her passing by him again. "You're making me seasick."

She stomped her foot and pouted. "My legs are itchy."

"Nicole's lawn's gonna have a dirt stripe." He squeezed her hand.

"Maybe you're just a little shellshocked. God knows you wouldn't be the only one."

Nancy didn't want to melt. It wasn't time to melt yet. "My baby brother almost died right in front of me," she argued, pleading with him in case he somehow didn't understand.

Steve smiled with a subtle purse of his lips. "Mhm," he said, looking into her in a way she wasn't prepared for. Nancy tugged, but he wouldn't let go of her hand. "You've gotta relax. Okay? He's fine. There's probably nothing out there and if there is, you can protect him. You've got the..." His gaze slid to her waist. He tilted his head, looking behind her. "Stuff."

It was good to be armed. "Okay." Nancy heaved the deepest breath she could. "Alright, you win."

"I wasn't trying to fight you, Nancy."

"I know! I know. I didn't mean it like that." The railing caught Nancy's attention. Her legs hadn't stopped itching inside and if she stood on the ground, the bar might be just the right height. "Thank you." She bent and gave Steve a kiss. "For everything. For saving him. And everything."

Steve put both his arms out and *whooshed* himself to his feet. "I do what I do. Wanna come warm up in the car?"

"Maybe in a minute."

"Alright, shoot yourself. I mean—" he clicked his cheek, "Don't. Don't shoot yourself."

Nancy rolled her eyes but let herself smile this time. Steve ran his hand down her arm and left for the car, maintaining an aloof saunter in spite of his missing shoe.

Nancy turned back to the porch. She squared her shoulders, lifted her chin and toed up beside it, standing within the dead garden. She pointed her toes and raised her leg. Her foot stopped short, requiring her to pull her knee with one arm and guide her shin with the other hand to get her heel up onto the rail. She wasn't in shape at all

anymore. How long had it been since the dance studio closed up? Four years?

Oh well. What can ya do? had been her dad's response to the tears. She hadn't spoken to him for three days after that, and she still didn't like to admit it, but he was right. The studio was gone. Not even her parents could stop the instructor moving away. So, no more dance. It was okay. Ballet lessons had been expensive because small towns made for small classes. Plus there was school to worry about. She was too short for dance anyway.

Keeping her balance by one hand on the rail, Nancy bowed her other arm out and, folding strictly at the waist, brought her nose down as close as possible to her raised knee, arcing the stretch down her leg and up her back. She remembered her instructor's feathery, theatrical voice; the squeak and patter of slippers on the smooth studio floor. It had been so peaceful there, in a group of girls each working on their own thing, keeping one another on task in quiet but dependable company.

Nancy tried to deepen the stretch by bending her lower knee, but it wasn't easy—these jeans had no give and she was really out of shape. Giddy with the fleeting senses of childhood, she bounced minusculely, testing how far she could go without hurting herself.

"Is that a gun in your pants or are you just wagging your tail?"

Nancy nearly pulled a muscle. How had she forgotten about the gun? It was right there, cold and hard in the crack of her butt, insistently distracting now that she had been reminded of it. She instructed a wave of anger to go away, since she had not technically asked to be left alone. "I'm not a dog, Steve."

"Mhm." Steve was right behind her. "You're a dancer." His vocal fry tickled behind her ear. His breath crept into her jacket collar, warming the chain of her ballet slipper necklace, and the goosebumps he produced settled into the hollow of her collarbone.

"You've never even seen me dance."

"For some totally insane reason, that's right, I haven't." Steve's

creeping hands hooked her hips. "But I can already tell you'd put every cheerleader in Hawkins to shame."

Nancy couldn't stretch like this. She put her foot down and closed her legs. "I'm not a cheerleader either."

Steve wrapped his arms all the way around her waist. "That's why I said you're a dancer." He pushed his hips forward, grinding the gun—and more—into her tailbone. Her heart leapt but Steve was already thinking the same thing she was: he jumped back, shying away from the dangerous contact.

Nancy turned around with her hands behind her back, adjusting the gun to make sure it stayed in place. "You want me to believe you're *not* trying to get me to join the cheerleading squad?"

Steve held his hands up. "Don't shoot, I'm just saying."

"Just saying what?"

"Just saying whatever pops into my head, Nancy. I'm not Shakespeare here. You're the graceful one."

She narrowed her eyes, "Are you actually scared of me right now?" and hooked both thumbs into her back pockets to test whether she was right.

"No," said Steve squarely. "No, of course not." Then he stumbled over a wooden candy cane and fell casually back against the brick wall of the house as if it was what he had meant to do.

Nancy placed a light hand on his chest. "You're not?"

Steve changed. His uneasy smile fell away to a scowl as he looked down at her. "Why would I be?" His voice was flat, his eyelids low. Insolent.

Nancy had the answer. She lifted her brows to emphasize what was left of her china doll mascara, licked her lips and stared at Steve's mouth to hold his gaze. When she had him locked in place she snuck her tube of lipgloss from her back pocket and pressed the end up under his chin. "Who knows?"

Steve started breathing hard. When Nancy leapt up onto her tiptoes and kissed him, he moaned. When she bit his lip, he moaned and got shorter, so with her teeth she dragged him firmly down to her level. She dropped her lipgloss, and judging by the way he twitched it must have landed on his foot. "I knew—" He managed between their nipping kisses, "Knew that—knew it wasn't—the gun."

"Yeah, right."

"Nancyy!" came a faraway call. Nancy's heart leapfrogged over its previous jump. No, it was okay. Partly okay. In all his urgency Mike had not said 'monster.'

Steve kept his hold, an arm around her waist, a thumb teasing her lip.

"Naancyyyy!"

"We have to go," Nancy said. "News."

"Ufya," Steve whispered in the middle of her last word. Stiffly, he released her to follow the sound of Mike's voice.

She nearly had to jog to keep up with him. "What was that?"

"Huh?

"What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Seriously, what did you say?"

"I swear to God I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Steve," Nancy warned, her mouth tight—and then she forgot about it all. "He's got Will with him?" This was either bad or very bad. "Hey! I don't want to get anybody in trouble."

Mike sat down at the edge of the clearing and patted the ground. Little Will plunked down beside him, chattering within the mound of a giant bedspread.

Nancy could see the whites of Will's eyes from here.

She sprinted right past Steve and landed on her knees in front of the boys. "Tell me." She searched from one to the other and back again. "Flat out. I won't get mad."

"Jonathan's not home. He wasn't feeling well and now he's gone." Mike looked at Will. "Your turn."

There was more?

"You can't tell my mom. She'll l-lose it." Will shook and squeaked and yet remained thoughtful, as though he had built a wall between body and mind and banished all of his anxiety to the far side. "I al-almost made her lose it. She's always up doing stuff in the middle of the night n-now unless she takes a pill. She can't know."

Nancy barely noticed Steve rustling the grass and sitting down beside her. She leaned forward, stretching, pushing her palms across the cold ground in Will's direction. "It's okay," she said. "You can trust me."

Will looked at Mike, reluctant. Did they think she was some kind of bully?

"You can trust her," Mike confirmed. "She's different now."

Nancy stuck her tongue out of the side of her mouth at Mike without losing sight of Will's big dinnerplate eyes. That seemed to do it: "I threw up a slug. On Christmas Eve."

A buried memory uncoiled at the base of Nancy's skull and lay there, waiting to be noticed. "You what?"

"It was black," Mike said. "It looked just like mine."

"I didn't-didn't tell anyone because it was Christmas."

Mike kept elaborating: "He brought it from the upside down. He must have."

"What?" said Steve.

Will shrank back. Nancy put her hand on Steve's knee. "Don't yell at him."

Steve grabbed his own hair. "You're *coughing* these things *up*? We've got to get you some help, like right now. We can take my car, we can go."

"I'm, I'm, I'm not sick anymore. My mom said the Demogorgon put this thing in my throat and I think the slug was just something le-left over. Like the doctors m-missed it. But..." Will *hmphed* at Nancy's outstretched hands.

Gooseflesh spread down Nancy's back from the nape of her neck, the creeping crawl of resurfacing denial, a little piece of mayhem labeled 'unimportant,' or at least not labeled as 'important' as everything else, and left behind. Abandoned. "What?"

"It like... It... put me back into the place for a second." Will glanced at Mike. "The upside down. But I figured maybe I was dreaming, you know? Like when, when s-sometimes I get up to go to the bathroom at ni-hn-night and it's like I'm there or if I get too cold or if my do-dog growls I think I'm-m there an-hnd."

"It's really cold out here," Mike explained.

"Yeah," Will agreed, laughing a little.

"Maybe one of them got Jonathan too," Mike said. "The way it got me and Will. Do you think it could have kept him somehow?"

Nancy started rubbing the back of her neck. "Steve, remember when you helped us? When you ran into the house and grabbed the bat because I couldn't..."

Steve cringed. "...He couldn't protect you."

Nancy tightened her grip on his knee, reading tea leaves in the grass. "Did it do anything to him?" She dug her nails in. "Did you see?"

"I was too busy beating the shit out of it, Nancy. If I'd looked anywhere else we'd all be dead."

"You beat up the Demogorgon?" Will's jaw had dropped. "You actually beat it up?"

Steve mimed the swing of a baseball bat and marked the impact with a *ksh*.

"Cool!"

Nancy remembered.

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7.

When Nancy flew back to Nicole's house, an invisible string pulled Steve along behind her. Steve had a string too. It pulled Will. Will's string pulled Mike.

Mike wasn't quite ready for a sprint: a handful of strides revived his drowner's cough. As he waited for the fit to pass Will returned to him, a solid shadow muting the distant glow from the car. His hair was as shiny as ever, like laquered wood, his face white-blue in the moonlight. It was good to have him back. Would it ever be normal, that he was back?

"Are you okay?"

Mike would have answered but his throat caught in a weird way. He doubled over and put all his energy into hacking out what felt like the last drop.

Will patted him with a light hand. "You're n-not coughing up slugs too, are you?"

"Nuh-uh." Mike pushed Will's hand away. "No leeches here, just water from the pool. Inhaled some." He coughed and coughed.

"Why do you keep calling them leeches?"

"Because that's what they are." Mike spat onto the ground in finality, ordering the cough to go away and stay there. "Black blobby blood-clotty... leech-looking things."

"Uhm. You mean black bumpy yellow-spotty slug-looking things, right?"

"I definitely don't."

"You don't?"

Mike shook his head.

"Does it matter?" asked Will.

"I don't know. But we should probably tell my sister at some point. She's the—" Mike cut himself short, dismayed by what now seemed an inevitable horror. "She's kind of the DM. Today."

"No way. You're letting her boss you around?" Will was clearly thrilled by the scandal of it. "I'm gonna tell her you said that!" He ran, laughing, dragging the long dark wizard's robe of his bedspread over the frozen ground behind him, inviting Mike to give chase. Mike took him up on it even though he was pretty sure Will was bluffing. He limited himself to a jog at first, then sped up when he noticed Nancy sitting on the ground with Steve hovering over her.

Nancy was yanking at a cracked corner of the front porch's first step, trying to heave it from beneath the foot of the railing, which anchored it in place. Steve was decidedly not helping. He made a face: *She's insane.*

"What's up?" said Mike.

"I'm looking for stones." Nancy got up on her feet and, folding at the waist, pulled with all her might. "Big ones."

Elle emerged from Will's room shadowing the footsteps of a ghost. Jonathan had to fall against the wall to get out of her way, else she might have floated straight through him.

Jarred by the impact and fully alert in wait of another inner crack, he retreated into the chair at the end of the hallway to will away his cold sweat. Just when he had almost, almost badgered himself to his feet again, the screen door at the back of the house pricked the thick air with a springing click of tin and plastic.

"Elle?"

He should have known she would leave—she hadn't really been here

since he found her in Will's room anyway—but he had her flashlight now, and her gas mask. They had to be her two most valuable belongings. She wouldn't just vanish without them, right?

Right?

"Elle?"

Jonathan's footfalls rattled the house to its foundations. Dishes chimed and floorboards groaned in reproach that he dared desecrate this crawling consumption with his pitifully juvenile persistence.

A twig snapped in the distance to the far left of the shed. He descended the steps from the back porch. "Hello?"

She didn't answer him.

Jonathan sat down by the lip of the old fire pit to catch his breath.

Mired in a fibrous web, the pit's chimney was a towering monument to filth and decay. It stood asymmetrically as if frozen in motion, the leg of a great elephant severed mid-step and left to turn black with age. A brick crumbled more readily under Jonathan's light touch than ever before, streaming tendrils of clay dust to his knee.

Beyond the chimney top, where the leg would once have sprouted from beside a round and wrinkled belly, danced the ever-present atmospheric motes of the cave. Upon their ink backdrop they became dull stars, their constellations blown to transience in the astral current, proof by analogy that nature's oldest observable forms moved as erratically as the whims of a gradeschool bully.

The pit's mouth gaped, blacker than black. Chipped cement made a few little teeth. Once upon a time—the summer of 1975—this oven had a heavy iron door. Upon that same time, Jonathan had made it his mission to teach Will a thing or two about hide and seek, since while he squealed with excitement at every mention of the game, he hadn't yet grasped the importance of hiding his feet.

So, naturally, Jonathan put his little brother into the pit and lost him.

The door stuck. The handle broke off. For ten minutes lasting two

hours Jonathan battled that door, blackening his battered hands with soot. When he pulled back a fingernail with a slipped grip he didn't even swear. Instead, he joked. He played. *Where's Will? Hm, is he under the porch? Hm, is he in the shed? No, I think he's gone! I guess he got eaten by a boogeyman. Oh well! More popsicles for me!*

Will cackled away in the dark, overjoyed by how good he had gotten at hiding, oblivious to fear because when they were together, that was for the bigger brother to bear.

Jonathan had finally used an old crowbar from the shed to pry the door off one of its hinges.

Found you!

It was at that vivid moment, upon glimpsing Will's smudged and joyful face as he clambered from the pit laughing and rolled to the ground without a scratch, that Jonathan fully understood the true importance of the bluff.

Will would never know anything had been wrong, neither would their mother, and this would never happen again. Rather than try to repair the one hinge he had broken, Jonathan knocked the iron door off completely and left it there. *I guess it rusted out*, was his answer to Mom's offhand remark a few days later. *We should tear the whole stupid ugly thing down anyway*, she concluded. *It's dangerous.*

Yet here it stood, still missing its door and partly filled in with cement, a shame. Jonathan would have liked to crawl inside it right then with a can of gasoline and a zippo and shut himself away. *Whooomph*. Easy as ripping off a bandaid. The biggest bandaid imaginable maybe, but almost as quick.

It wasn't that he wanted to die, nor had he ever—fading into the background was enough—it was that he had to die. The monster had targeted him rather than Nancy. It had knocked him breathless and spat its snotty parasitic pollen down his throat as he gasped for air, and that was... it. That he had protected her by distracting it rather than by beating it was his silver medal, which was better than no medal at all. Better than no Nancy at all.

He did wish, though, that he hadn't bluffed *himself* so hard. Today would not have been a day of saving the best things for later had he connected the dots in time.

The beam from Elle's flashlight had dulled to brown. It flickered without intensity nor arrhythmia, and thus without fault. Just the electricity. The batteries were dying, but they weren't dead yet.

Jonathan tucked the flashlight's handle into a strap of the gas mask to make a headlight. The filth and decay to which the towering chimney was a monument stood just there, out beyond the shed. The now impassably dense woodland sagged under the weight of what had to be the most invasive species in the unknown universe. He could almost see it breathing.

Elle had gone off out there in the dark without her light and without her gas mask, which was stupid of her, but there was no angle by which she could be held responsible for her larger situation. Whatever had happened to her, however she had become what she was, whatever reason Hopper had for hiding her here, there was no way any of it could be her own fault. She was way too young for that.

In the shed, Jonathan tugged the light's cold bauble chain. It didn't turn on. Light switches didn't work in dreams, either: this was a trick he had taught himself when he was little to test whether he was sleeping so he could wake himself from a nightmare. He closed his eyes, chasing memories of a warm bed, and hit a wall instead.

A pair of pruning shears peeked out from a low shelf into his sweeping spotlight, but he found they were so rusted he could hardly open them. He tossed them to the floor, relieved—he didn't want to go at this with a dinky pair of glorified scissors anyway.

Jonathan exited the shed with the family axe in his hands.

His first swing sailed between a pair of vines without hitting home, nearly taking him for a ride along with it. His breath roared in his ears. The coming exertion was going to make him sicker. "Fuck it," he said.

It made more sense to swing at the places where the invading

growths clung to the trees, so that was what he did. The axe cracked into its first target with an unexpected squelch. A pupil of black sap reflected his light and dripped. The matter inside the wound he had created was fleshy. Meaty. Poking from the middle of it was a pale piece of bone, shattered to reveal spongy marrow.

He looked up. Intertwined among the tree branches with the flaky bark vines and the slime was something else, something animal, a giant latticework organism of skin stretched over tendons, of knobby knees and knuckles. He saw a thousand limbs woven together into one body above his head, locked into impossible contortions by their own innate structure, stretching far beyond the reach of his light. He may as well have been walking into a tangled spiderweb made out of big vertebrate spiders.

Did this abomination have a nervous system? Was it conscious? Could it feel pain?

Jonathan pulled his axe from the tree and spread his hands to get the best possible grip on the handle.

He hoped so.

Nancy didn't want to break in, she had to break in. Steve did not understand this yet.

"You can't just go busting into somebody's house on a hunch, Nancy."

"Yes I can." Nancy broke a nail in the crack of the step and didn't let it slow her down as she pulled and jimmied from every possible angle. "I can today."

"Please stop. Please. Just stop. Breathe for five minutes. Think it through. You're being irrational. Mike, kid, other kid, both you guys, could you please back me up on this?"

But the boys were quiet. Good boys. "I am not listening to you right now," Nancy said. She was making headway. If she picked out this one rusty little screw then maybe she could pull the whole railing right off the step.

"Wait, wai... Wait. Remember the talk we had, like ten minutes ago? About chilling out?"

"Yeah, what was it you said? That he's 'sawing logs'? Well guess what Steve? You were wrong. He is not sawing logs. Jonathan is *missing*."

"And he's not—What, you think he's in there? Jonathan Byers is not locked up in Nicole From School's house right now either! You're losing your mind scrambling after a little clue that'll probably amount to shit-all, and before you even get that far you need, oh right, a fully functioning dark room, which isn't here. I mean look at this place. It's a complete shit heap. I bet they don't even have a color TV."

Glued in place by eons of rust, the screw would not budge. Nancy beat the railing with the palm of her hand. There was no reasoning with it. She was just going to have to pull on the step with everything she had, plus a little bit more than that. "You still don't remember?" she snapped.

"Remember *what*?"

"That's right, you didn't see." Nancy had hardly seen either. First she was so sure the monster would slaughter them both in the dark that she forgot she had a gun, then the gun jammed but it was actually just her finger trying to pull the trigger guard in place of the trigger, and by the time she figured *that* out the thing had already spat up all over Jonathan's face. "You didn't hear him choking. You were too busy—" The whistle through the air, the thump and squish. "Being really..." The howl of inhuman betrayal straight from the mouth of the faceless reaper itself. *He's in the trap!* "Really awesome."

The cement chunk came loose, scraping the railing foot and sending Nancy into a backwards sprawl. Steve caught her under her arms and helped her to her feet, but when she turned around he tried to kidnap her new pet rock, so she shoved it up inside her coat, wrapped it in both arms and scowled at him.

"What didn't I see?" he conceded.

"It infected him, I know it. Whatever it is, it grew inside him and it took him away. I know that's what happened." What evidence did

they have of another whole monster? Nothing, no missing people on the news, no sightings. It had taken Will six weeks to grow that thing inside him, and now in the same amount of time— "It's the only explanation that makes any sense."

Steve rubbed his hand over his mouth in sick acceptance.

With nowhere else to go, Nancy's frustration turned on her. "I practiced so much, I was so ready and then when it actually mattered I couldn't protect him. He didn't say anything about it. So I just... forgot." She fell forehead-first into Steve's shoulder and stayed there, holding her stone tummy as the cold breeze blew between their bodies, freezing her fingers. "I *forgot*. I'm the world's worst monster hunter."

Steve's hug transformed him into a strong warm pocket. "How many monster hunters are there? World's worst is still, what, third place? Worst case, you get bronze."

"Consolation for trying? Screw that." While it was nice to smoosh her face into Steve's pullover, Nancy refused to close her eyes. "I am *not* done trying."

"Kay, how bout a cliche? You like those. I'll make a new one just for you."

That wasn't how cliches worked. Nancy headbutted him. "Shut up."

"A-hem. 'There are no dark rooms in straw huts.'"

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

Steve sighed out the grandiose defeat of a failed showman. "It means it's time to find a phone and call the cops."

"No way." The edges of Nancy's pet rock forced satisfying dents into her fingers through her jacket. "We are not doing that. They won't listen."

"Come on, between you and the braniacs and the camera we've really got something for them now." Steve's mapping hands skipped stones across her back, worrying their way from one knot-prone spot to the

next. "They'll have to listen."

Nancy tensed up even more. Steve wasn't giving her a back rub, he was searching for an 'off' switch. It felt exactly like a fight. "If they listen at all it'll only be to twist whatever we give them into proof that there's nothing wrong." She grew dark and solid inside. "I'm not dealing with that again."

"Hey, shh, stop. You don't have to. Too much out-there stare for one night." Steve definitely wasn't just holding her anymore. This was a bear hug. He was restraining her. "Let somebody else deal with this. Let them do their job."

Oh, that was *it*. "Their *job*? I've already seen them do their *job*, Steve!" Nancy hit him in the side, and with a little *oof* he set her free. "It's their *JOB* to tell me to go home and stop worrying because Jonathan, oh, he just ran away! And *why* did Jonathan run away? Because Jonathan likes me, just like Barbara liked me, and he 'ran away' because it turns out I'm just some average rebellious slut who slept with the wrong guy!"

"Nancy, you... ?"

"Pigs, Steve! The police are pigs!"

"Okay, but... The wrong guy?"

"No, you idiot. It's all bullshit. You are not the wrong guy. And I am breaking into this house." Nancy took the rock from her coat and hefted it in both hands to get a sense of the weight. "If you don't want to help because you're worried your dad might find out, that's totally okay. I understand. Go home. But if you call the police yourself I will never speak to you again."

Nicole's front door opened.

"Hi," said Will. "Mike boosted me through the window."

Mike appeared from around the corner of the house bundling Will's navy bedspread in his arms. "You were going to check for open windows before you actually broke something, right?"

"Um. Yeah." The rock tipped from Nancy's hand and thumped into the dirt of the garden. "Of course," but no matter how hard she tried she could not bite the embarrassment off her own face.

Amazingly, Mike shrugged it off. "It's okay," he said, hopping up onto the stoop. "Everybody gets too focused sometimes."

Steve patted Nancy on the back from behind. She could feel the laughter in it.

It had begun to scream.

As Jonathan hacked his way through the infested woods he came upon no mouths or throats, nor heads, nor torsos, nor any other way for life to speak or even breathe, and yet the sound was incessant, a simmering crustacean screech pestering him forward and rising to a tirelessly echoing choir as each strike of his axe added the voice of one more prawn. He put his headphones over his ears to dull the sound.

This project had begun as a therapeutic sport. The drawing of blood had combined with the thrill of exercise to hone every dark corner of his being into a beam of destruction: this wasn't an axe, it was a goddamn lightsaber; he wasn't just hacking a path through an impassable forest, he was exterminating an entire species to a tune of whack, crunch, kick and crush. Even the screeching had sounded good at first. It meant the problem was someone else's.

But gradually, as Jonathan added more and more voices to the choir, those voices began to resonate within him. The vibration started at the flare of his ribcage, subtle enough to bluff away, but soon it had risen to his collarbones. From there it crept a tickle up his throat, into his nose and against his eardrums. This hungry thing in him, this pregnant lump of rock and rubber capable of outwitting a telekinetic prodigy, was screaming too.

There was no point in turning back. He only paused to sneeze, which he did often but quickly because resting any longer than a few seconds at a time might stop this engine from turning for good. That wasn't going to happen, not yet. He had to give Elle her stuff back.

He had to tell her this wasn't her fault. He had to rebel mercilessly against his executioner until the very moment his buzzing brain blinked out.

What Jonathan knew was momentum. What he *was* was momentum.

His axe got stuck mid-swing as a piece of the beast hooked it above his head. With a yank he brought down a thorny grey crab leg the size of his arm, which bent back up again, slowly, kinetically. Insulted, he shoved past it to return to his work, then stumbled back strangling as it pulled his jacket against his throat. He dropped his axe to grab the warm limb and unhook it from his collar—would break it in half with his bare hands—but then he was free, tripping forward toward a rustling nest of jointed appendages, and through a gap he spotted a tiny blur the color of a down-filled pink winter coat.

He charged into the appendages and trampolined back without breaking through. Bending to grab his axe introduced him to a hole at ground level, and so he fell flat, pushed his weapon out first and crawled from the forest.

Air.

He climbed to his feet, stumbled a few steps and collapsed as carefully as he knew how to, rolling onto his back in the sticky grass. He pushed his headphones down around his neck. He escaped the gas mask, flinging it and the flashlight aside. It smelled like old eggs out here but it was the freshest air he could get, and it would be good enough, at least for a few cooling breaths.

The forest wailed on. His infection whined a mosquito's revenge inside his ears. He sneezed three excruciating times and fought back a fourth to call out, "Elle," but he may as well have whispered. The monster was stealing his voice away.

He rolled onto his stomach and pillow'd his cheek upon his paw to squint as far out across the clearing as the blue soup atmosphere would allow. That dark lump was a house. That faded spot of pink was Elle's coat. She had led him next door. Why next door? "Elle," he said, squeaking this time, and the pink spot changed its trajectory.

A blink later, a boot crunched down beside his ear. "Get up?" She panted like a sprinter. "Get up."

Why did she sound so scared? Was it because of the forest? It was okay, Jonathan was just killing it. He was winning. He blundered through his buzzing brain, compiling scraps. "Don't—"

"Get up."

"—worry."

His collar strangled him again and the seams of his jacket sliced into his armpits. "Get up!" Elle had taken his advice: she wasn't afraid anymore, she was furious. She throttled him some more. "Get up! *Get up!*"

"It's not your fault."

"Get up! Get up! *What is wrong* with you?"

Jonathan didn't know what to say, but he was awake. He was sitting up. He was laughing hoarsely into his elbow and trying to figure out, around the whining in his ears and through the corners of his eyes, whose voice Elle had just been speaking with.

In the space of a thought her visible anger slipped into confusion and then relief, settling finally upon determination. She did not sit down for a rest. Instead, she handed Jonathan the Yoda bottle. It was heavier than last time, so he drank without rationing. He washed the smears of black blood from his cold hands, patted the dampness to his cheeks and wiped a cupped handful through the stiff straw that his bangs had become. By the time he was finished, the noise in him had dulled to a muffled hum. Elle put the bottle away. She held out both hands. "Get up."

Jonathan gave her an arm and let her pry him up off the ground. "Brought your stuff," he said, pointing, and she hesitated. "Go ahead, I'm okay." He carefully distributed his weight between his heels in the soft earth.

Elle hopped to the side, put her mask on top of her head without pulling it over her face, reattached her dead flashlight to her shoulder

and handed Jonathan his axe. She grabbed hold of his forearm just as he maybe might probably not have lost his balance. With a two-handed tug she coaxed him to walk, and did not let go.

"Is there a plan?" he asked.

"No."

"Why Nicole's?"

"Nicole?"

"Yeah, that's, y'know. Next d—" Jonathan's voice cut out. He coughed to jar it back to the proper frequency. "Next door. That's her house."

"Friends," said Elle. Strange, Nicole wasn't a friend. Nicole was a rat. Jonathan dragged the axe's head through the grass, bumping it along and snowballing it with layers of webbing and goo. He found that it made a good cane, kind of like a cross-country ski pole, but Elle wouldn't be interested if he showed off his discovery: she was in the middle of another quiet cryptic phase. But then she added, "Mike. Nancy, Steve. Will."

Jonathan nearly tripped. He felt as though a lasso had tightened around his waist to pull him backwards, while another dragged him forward by the chest. "I don't think I can," he said.

"They're being loud. We can."

8. eight

8.

Nicole's house smelled like coconut-mint and cat litter. Nancy patted the wall until she found the light switch, which lit up a small lamp over the front door. She bumped right into Will when she sped inside and with a "Sorry!" she surveyed the home: a sparse brown living room with no TV at all, a kitchen with a two-chair table, a hallway straight ahead, two bedrooms, one bathroom, extra door. "Does Nicole have a basement?" She pulled the sticky door open and headed down the stairs. Yes. The principal trait of basements was that their rooms were dark.

"Dunno, I just drove her home. Oh, hey. Basement."

Wooden stairs creaked under Nancy's feeling feet. Dragging her hand along the wall in want of a railing, she descended into a damp black pit that reeked of mildew and more so of cat litter. When her shoe tapped the solidity of a cement floor she spread her hands all over the wall, but found it empty. The backs of her forearms felt hot. "Hey, is there a light switch near you?"

"Oh, uh. Yep." A bare bulb flashed to life, revealing a small one-room cellar.

Along the wall to the left sat a washer and dryer with a laundry tub between them. Above the laundry tub there was a little cobwebby-curtained window, and under it on the floor, a litter box. In the centre of the room a card table heaped chaotically with folded laundry stood over a floor drain. Along the far wall on the right, a clothesline stretched from corner to corner. It was empty of everything but wooden pins, wire hangers and an old wedding dress. The hem of the dress puddled on top of a long tiered stack of boxes. The stack's lowest layer bore the dark horizontal blemish of past floodwater, and in a gap between those boxes, in the furthest corner

from the stairs, a silver-grey cat crouched, staring at her.

And that was it.

Nancy slapped her hands to her face and punished the back of her head against the wall so hard it cracked in her ears. There was no word for the sound she made.

"Any luck down there?"

What was she doing?

Steve met her at the top of the stairs wearing a look that promised she wouldn't have to answer him out loud. "I figure you'll do Nicole's room for girl reasons?" he said. "The guys are softly ransacking the bookcase in the front room, so..." He leaned on the hallway wall with that hunch in his shoulders again, with his hands in his pullover pockets and his eyes less focused than normal.

"You can leave, it's okay. Really. It's okay. This is dangerous. We're still breaking the law." Nancy tried to force a laugh. "Get out while you still can." It came out stale.

"Sure, I could do that but there's no evidence." Steve shrugged. "I like no evidence, especially when there's no stealing either. Take her room and be quick, hey? I'll mess around out here."

"Are you sure?"

"W'yeah, of course. If I left I'd have to call the cops on you myself." Steve winced at her, sarcastic and pleading at once. "...Since that would be my natural course of action."

"I didn't mean it." Nancy hardly even remembered saying it. "I was scared. And... mad. But not at you. I'm sorry."

"You said something dumb when you were scared? Who does that?" Steve shouldered up from the wall and headed for the living room. He planted a peck on the top of her head as he passed her. "Get your act together, Nancy."

Nancy left the basement door open for the cat.

Elle had already been inside Nicole's house. The front door was open, the window was broken and a rock lay on the floor of the living room, a crashed meteor in a spray of glass. Jonathan juggled his weight from the wobbly railing to the doorway. "You shouldn't climb through broken windows," he teased. "You'll hurt yourself."

"Sorry," Elle said, holding her flashlight and hooking her backpack with the same arm. She dug around in it until she found some batteries and switched them into the flashlight with a shotgunner's hands, discarding the dead ones like bullet casings. She pointed a bright beam of chalk into the house. "Help," she offered, twisting to extend a hand. Jonathan declined and ditched his axe in favor of the wall.

They moved through the living room, past the kitchen—Had there been a fire in here?—and down the hallway into a blue bedroom. Although dusted with grime, the dresser looked a little bit girly. The stacks of magazines on top were moldy, their edges so blackened that barely any white showed at all.

Elle sat down at the room's small desk, dwarfing the chair, puffy in her dirty skirt and big pink coat.

The corner of the bedroom floor nearest the door had rotted away. Jonathan used some intuitive sign language to borrow the flashlight and found that the hole went right through to an underground pond. The floodwater reflected the light like a mirror. There was a table down there, lumped with laundry. Tight golfballs of white fluff dotted the clothing, enormous cousins of the egg sacks that tended to congregate under windowsills and picnic tables.

When he caught a hint of his reflection in the floodwater he shuffled away. He didn't want to know. He planted the flashlight beside the phone on the bedside table, endowing the ceiling with an artificially shining full moon, and checked out the bed in the corner. Like the rest of the room, it was mostly clean. Maybe a little musty, but there was nothing to stop him climbing in and letting it swallow him whole.

Jonathan sank back into the far corner under the window, between

the bedside table and the desk, and enjoyed the dryness of the hard wood floor. Wall corners made good vertical pillows. He put his headphones on because it seemed like the thing to do, but they only magnified the whine inside him. He sneezed and took them off again.

Usually, when he wanted music but didn't have any on hand, he just closed his eyes and listened. Either he would find something, or something would find him—a fly, or a leaf, or a kid with a ball—and he would trace their paths as far as he could before they blended into everything else. It was silent now, so he pushed his ears out, past the noise in his head, and listened to the silence. Something would come. Something always came.

Elle poked at something on the desk, too high up for Jonathan to see, making little schwick-click sounds. It didn't matter what it was. It was better not to know what it was, so you could listen.

It was cold in here.

A scratchy blanket fell on him. When had he closed his eyes? Why was he forgetting whether his eyes were closed? The dull clang of his inner alarm awakened a captive swarm of inner bees. It would be nice to hear Will laugh again instead. Maybe he could come up with a joke.

"Hey," he whispered.

Elle had dark smudges under her eyes. She looked down at him from her chair and waited.

"Can you make a new hole, like in a wall or something?"

"No."

"But you have another one. Of the worms."

She nodded.

"And you said Will's here."

She nodded.

"Please, Elle."

"No."

"Please."

"No."

Jonathan let her see him cry this time. He was too angry and tired to hide it. He wanted her to see it, he needed her to *get* this. He trapped her in the jaws of his blurry stare, he pierced her with it, and he wasn't going to let her go until she got it.

Finally, her crumpling expression proved that Jonathan was contagious. "Vulnerable people," she explained, and hiccuped. "I'm the monster. I made you the monster too."

It was a lot worse than watching a baby cry. He wished he hadn't done it.

...was all alone, tumbled a moan from the walls.

"What was that?"

Elle ignored him, her eyes shut, her troubled face shiny and stiff. She was listening.

...all alone...

It almost sounded like Mom.

This is not yours to fix alone! One day she was apologizing for needing Jonathan to do life alone—to cook, clean, do the repairs, get the groceries; to answer Will's hard questions, homework and worse—and the next she was yelling at him for doing life alone. *You act like you're all alone out there in the world but you're not.* Sometimes she yelled at her own reflection in his eyes without realizing it. That was when he was the most alone.

It wasn't Mom, though.

Every soft feature of Elle's face gestured to the centre of her forehead.

"Will's hiding," she said, drifting blindly to her feet. A little fairy bell rang. The rotary phone from the bedside table appeared in the shelf of her hands. "Find him."

Nancy stood in the middle of Nicole's tidy blue bedroom holding her elbow and biting the insides of her mouth, simultaneously shaking with the need to rush and frozen in her reluctance to invade Nicole's privacy. She let her eyes do the searching and spotted two foot-high magazine stacks, *Life* and *People*, on top of the dresser. In her own room's equivalent spots she kept a pair of music boxes.

The bed was small and neatly made with a faded flower print spread. A pea green rotary telephone and a lamp occupied the bedside table. Past the window and the corner, Nicole's homework desk had an electric typewriter on it, and behind the typewriter a row of notebooks and diaries lined the wall. An old Ziggy mug brimmed over with pens and pencils. Monochrome photos and news clippings covered the corkboard. The wastepaper basket was full.

"Hey Steve?"

Steve finalized a conversation in the living room: "So you'll tell your ma tomorrow? Good man." He caught his own momentum on Nicole's doorframe and drummed a beat to introduce himself. "Hm?"

"Why did you call Nicole an airhead?"

"Because she basically doesn't talk. She's got some stories to tell but it's like she doesn't have an original thought in her head."

"Do Tommy and Carol treat her like an airhead?"

"They don't really treat her like anything. She's just kind of there half the time."

"Steve." Nancy turned to him on her toes, amused. "Nicole isn't an airhead, she's a reporter." That was what she wanted to be, at least. Did she work on the school paper? Nancy couldn't remember the last time she had looked at a copy.

"Oh. Well, good, that means she'd understand. Reporters toss houses

for information all the time, right? Speaking of, have you...?"

No.

Nancy had not been thinking about Jonathan, or cameras, or film, or finding the answers to any important questions at all.

When she opened her mouth a wheeze whistled out of it.

"I do not have my act together," she said. An emptying sob hunted her down, all the way down to the floor, where she sat and stared into the black abyss in her hands. Steve did some kind of obscure nudging to comfort her in the distance, but it didn't matter what Steve did. They would never see Jonathan again. This trail had been dead from the beginning. The only thing missing was a body.

Nancy saw maggots in the scar on her palm, so she scratched them out and tangled her fingers in the hair at the back of her neck. She wanted to rip that out too. "He was all alone." Her own voice scraped glass against the inside of her skull. "He was all alone and he's dead."

"Christ, Nancy! Don't—"

"He died *all alone*."

"—say that. The little kid's out there. Other kid, brother-kid. *Right there*."

It was too late. Will stood in the doorway, shaking from head to foot. Mike's scowling white face appeared above Will's and then slid away into nowhere.

Nancy tried to get Will's attention but he was looking all around the room as if the whole thing was about to reach out and attack him from every angle. "I didn't mean it," she lied. "I'm just worried." Will still did not recognize her. He seemed blinded by a darkness invading his eyeballs from inside and from outside at once. "I'm sure he'll be okay. We'll find him."

"You're a shitty DM, Nancy."

"Go to hell, Michael!"

"Fuck," said Steve.

The phone rang.

Nancy yelped. Her eyes and Steve's eyes got into an argument over what to do. It was a complicated argument. Nancy didn't know what side she was on or why there were sides in the first place.

The phone rang.

"Don't answer it," Mike said. He was putting Will's huge blanket back over his shoulders. Will still wasn't moving, except to breathe at randomly varying speeds. "Seriously, don't. You'll just tell whoever it is that we're here and we'll all go to jail."

The phone rang.

"I kinda feel like..." Steve slid up the side of the bed and sat on it. "I don't know why, but I...? Kinda feel like I should."

The phone rang.

"Well you *shouldn't*," Mike commanded. "Hasn't your girlfriend already screwed up enough? Or are you even dumber than she is?"

The phone rang.

Nancy felt it too. A little wriggle by her heart. A rising blockage of her windpipe. "Answer it. Steve, this is important. This is so important, just do it."

"What the *hell*?" Mike shouted.

The phone rang.

"What do I say?"

Did Steve have *stage fright*?

"It doesn't matter what you say!" Patience lost, Nancy propelled herself toward the phone. Steve lifted the receiver just before she got there, skirting it under her fingers.

"...Hello?"

A century passed in stillness. Then Steve grabbed Nancy's arm so hard he might break it, and it made her love him back.

"Yeah." He sounded like a handful of stones. "For sure, hold on." He held the receiver out to Will, but Will didn't move, so Nancy took the base of the phone in one hand and the receiver in the other. With a big impassable balloon of repentance lodged between the receiver and her ear, she carefully toed the long skinny grey cord away from the wall, and crossed the room, and put the receiver into Will's hand.

Will almost dropped it. Nancy helped his fingers around it and he put it up to his ear. "Huh-huh-huh-huh-hi-Hi. Hi?"

He brought it with him to the desk chair and Mike followed, holding the blanket in place as Will sat down to listen. Nancy knelt on the floor before them both, sheltering the base of the phone in her hands, alert in vigilant defense against accidental hangup. She strained her ears but she couldn't hear anything, not buzz nor breath.

Will started laughing. He bent forward, flopping his hair, hiding his face, and quietly but uncontrollably, he laughed and laughed. "You're retarded," he said. "...Yeah, I know. ...I know you're right, I know. You're just also retarded."

Well, that was a relief. Jonathan wasn't dead, he was just retarded.

Will reached out and gave the receiver to Nancy.

Nancy wanted to be retarded too.

"Hey," she said.

Hey.

Nancy would blow a hundred IQ points to the wind as wishborne dandelion fluffs if it meant all of this could turn out to have been some stupid nutcase goose chase, if it meant Jonathan was only calling Nicole's house because he was looking for Nicole because they had started dating without Nancy knowing.

"What's so funny?"

She prayed a lightning bolt would come down and strike her retarded, proving she had been nothing but an irrational lovesick puppy all along who in the next two minutes would have to drag herself home with her tail between her legs, unable to explain to Steve why she was still so upset.

I told him it smells like Grandpa's farts in here.

It would have been a lot better that way, if Nancy had been wrong all along, if Jonathan had just thrown her away and abandoned her the way she had abandoned him.

"Are you in the house? You're in this house?"

Yeah, I'm... here.

"Stay here, don't move. I'll find Hopper and your mom."

Don't.

"They'll come get you."

Don't tell my mom.

"What? What do you mean don't tell your mom?"

I'm too sick.

"Are you crazy?"

I can't come back. It's not safe.

The film reel of the last few hours rolled down a steep hill.

"Worms, right? In your mouth? In your stomach?"

Jonathan just breathed.

"Right?"

He was just breathing. Just barely.

"Right?!"

Yeah.

"Listen to me. They will come through anyway. If you stay there and let them kill you they'll just breed in your body and come through and take more people to the other side. Do you understand? Barb's body did it to Mike in Steve's pool."

... Is he okay?

"He's fine. And you will be fine. We'll figure something out. All of us, like last time." Nancy blew the whimper in her voice to smithereens. "You can't protect anyone by hiding there." She spoke from her belly, "We're going to come get you. *I will come get you.*"

Steve squeezed Nancy's shoulder and didn't let go. His fingers were digging in, hurting her. She put her hand over his and he apologized even though he hadn't done anything wrong.

No.

"What?"

Don't come in here. I'll take care of it.

"What do you mean you'll take..."

I'll take care of it.

Comprehension tore through Nancy's arm, lifting the telephone's base above her head, whipping it toward the floor, but it stopped short with hands all over it, hands all over hers, Will's hands and Steve's hands, putting it down gently. "You will do no such thing."

Don't scare him. It's okay.

"No it is not okay! It's the furthest thing from okay! You're not—" Nancy slapped the floor. "You're not—" Nicole's wastebasket was full. "*Jonathan, you are not disposable!*"

The line clicked.

"Jonathan?"

Nancy plunged the hangup, found no dial tone, then held it down, smothering it, burying it in a rage. "Jonathan, you call back right now!" He was in one of these corners, one of these four corners, "Right now. *Jonathan!*"

Steve picked Nancy up by her shoulders and held her captive until her feet anchored. "I have a car. Forget the phone." The phone was broken now anyway. She let it fall away in a cacophony.

A muffled *kek-kek-kek* sound, a gleeful semi-secret snickering, wound its way into the room from down the hall. "Stevie Wonder thinks he still has a car!"

Steve tripped out into the hallway. There was another snicker, and a lopsided flurry of footsteps, and a curling, ironic cheerleader laugh.

By the typewriter, Mike was holding a piece of paper and crying at it.

"Mike, where's Will?"

Mike looked up and sniffed.

Distant handprints bonged a windowpane.

"My tires? You *slashed my goddamn tires?* Right now? Did you have to do this today? Any other day, *any other day* would have been *fine*—I can't believe you just..."

"You forgot to give us your burglary schedule," Carol deadpanned.

"Yeah man, this one's on you," said Tommy. "We could have worked out something better but we had no idea when you'd be coming."

"Jeez Nicole, do you not have any other friends?"

Maybe she did, but these ones made the best headlines.

9. nine

9.

Jonathan fell back into the corner with his hands sweating and Nancy still ringing in his ear, Nancy harmonizing with the beast in his belly, Nancy screaming like a rabbit full of birdshot. He pushed past her to listen to his own darting heartbeat instead, and hoped he might slow it down enough that he wouldn't have to notice when it stopped.

When he was a kid Jonathan thought death was just like going to sleep only it lasted forever, because that was what all the parents told their kids when their pets died. By the time he turned ten he had learned to keep an empty placeholder over the process of dying, which his father did not disturb when he put the rifle in his hands. Jonathan aimed because he was shown how, he fired because he was told to, and the sound the rabbit made turned his placeholder black.

Why is it screaming? Why's it screaming like that?

Because you shot it, buddy. Nice shot, too. He's already starting to quiet down. You did a good job.

No, I did it wrong, I did it wrong. I know I did it wrong! I made a mistake or this wouldn't be happening!

Woah kid, hold on. Get a hold of yourself. You didn't do anything wrong. It's just a distress call. It happens when you shoot them sometimes.

Then I shouldn't have shot him.

Shooting's a better way to go than most — it's already over, see? He's dead.

He didn't have to die!

Everything has to die, Jonathan. Everything. You can't grow up until you

understand that.

I do understand that. But he didn't have to die yet!

This one did. He died so you could learn something today. Why don't you show him some respect?

You could have just told me, Dad! I would have believed you, I trusted you! You didn't have to prove anything!

Okay, well, we'll eat it too. I'll show you how to skin it and we'll eat it so it doesn't go to waste.

I don't want to eat it! I want to go home!

Fine. I'll take you home. But can you do us both a favor? Don't tell your mother about this.

A slowing pulse brought the bedside lamp to life.

On off, on off, on off.

On, off. On. Off.

On.

It stayed on.

Nancy was okay with this. Everything was fine. She didn't need Steve to drive. She could take Mike's bike to Hopper's place—by the lake, right? A trailer somewhere by the lake—and before she did that, she could take a minute to finish what she started. The camera might not matter much anymore, but at least she would be telling the truth. The truth had a way of clearing the air whether the contents of it mattered or not. Well, sometimes it did. Today it would.

Lithe and snakelike, Nicole stood in a slouch against her closed front door, her red hair fiery in the glow from above. Tommy and Carol were somewhere in the living room to the right, but Tommy and Carol were not relevant, and Steve was not talking.

At each of Nancy's marching steps down the hallway toward her, Nicole's eyes got a little wider. Nancy reached out. Nicole flinched. Nancy took Nicole's hands firmly in hers.

"I'm sorry I came into your house when you weren't here. This will sound crazy, but I did it because I need to develop a roll of film. This is a matter of life or death. I am not exaggerating. It's an emergency. I can explain everything to you tomorrow." Nancy did not promise. "Everything. Can you help me?"

Nicole's eyelids bobbed up and down, like a person waking up. "Why do you need it developed? You need to see what's on the film?"

Nancy held on a little tighter. "Exactly."

"I've got a safelight in my nightstand for checking which negatives I want to bring to school. You don't need to develop the film just to see what's on it. You only need the red light."

A bolt of stupid struck Nancy in the head. *Duh*. She banished it in a frenzy of blinks and lifted her chin a little to help her voice carry. "My brother and his friend are just behind me. Do you mind if they get the lightbulb so Steve and I can borrow it until we see you again tomorrow night, say around... seven? It's really important. I'm *really* sorry to bother you."

"Um... Sure? It's just a red bulb in a box. In the drawer."

"Thank you so much, Nicole." The air was almost clear. Nancy could feel it. She pulled Nicole's hands gently, inching her away from the door—

"Woooah, what is *this*?"

Nancy's gun slid up and out of the back of her pants.

Tommy fell three heavy steps back as Nancy whirled around to face him. Fascinated, he spun the gun ineptly around his finger by the trigger guard.

"Give. That. Back."

"Oh my God," Tommy said, and twirled the gun again, stumbling under the centrifugal force of his own arm. Was he a freckled circus clown? His smile was wide enough, his eyebrows high enough. "This is *amazing*."

Tommy had been drinking.

"Give it back."

Tommy stopped twirling the gun and held it like he was an action movie star. He aimed it in many different directions in a very short period of time. "Armed robbery. You are in so much shit right now."

Steve skipped a quiet '*no no no no*' record by the front window. When he caught Nancy's eye he leaned back against the pane as if to press himself through it, straining the threadbare gossamer curtain on its hooks. '*They don't listen to me anymore*,' he mouthed.

"Isn't it *legal* to shoot intruders during a break-in?" Carol wondered. She was sitting on the living room sofa upside down, with her legs up the back and her hair blending into the copper shag carpet, tonguing a piece of gum in her smile. She winked at Nancy. Nancy could have killed her.

Next to the sofa, in the hallway beyond Tommy's shoulder, stood a skinny scarecrow with a priceless froggy moon face and a wild mop of silky black hair.

"Mike, you and Will need to leave this house. Go. Leave. Now."

Mike and Nancy shared an inedscribable something. It was nice. Mike ran away.

Jonathan wasn't describing what a gas can looked like, or explaining to Elle what the word 'siphon' meant.

He wasn't asking her to douse the body as soon as he was dead, or to draw a line from this corner to the kitchen, pouring carefully to preserve fuel. He wasn't telling her to knot a rope from strips of dishtowel and soak it in gasoline to use as a wick connecting the stove's coil burners to the puddle on the floor. He wasn't making her

promise to wait until everyone had left the normal version of the bedroom before she turned on the burner, just in case some of the fire came through, and he wasn't telling her to leave the house right after she hit the knob.

It was familiar, what he wasn't doing. It was like that time he wasn't arranging Will's funeral by himself, but less real. So maybe this wasn't really real either. Maybe he would wake up in a hospital in a minute like Will had, and not kill any of the nurses like Will hadn't.

Elle sat with an elbow on the desk, propping her head up with her fist squashing her cheek. Jonathan hadn't noticed until now that her nose had a drop of blood under it. He had hidden behind closed eyes while giving his cremation instructions so he wouldn't have to see them written on her face.

"Was it hard to make the phone work?"

Elle nodded. She carried permanent tension in the corners of her mouth. "Hard to punch through." She wiped her nose on her hand, then wiped her hand on the dark leg of her pants.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes." She dug around in a coat pocket. "But I'm tired. They're quiet again." She gave Jonathan the water bottle and returned to her digging. Instead of drinking, he put the bottle down, wrapped the scratchy blanket around his fists and pulled it up to his chin.

What was it like to be burned alive?

Was it worse to burn alive from the inside by acid or from the outside by fire?

As he fixated on this, Jonathan's noisy vibration swelled the way it had done in the woods, threatening to break open the way it had done in the road. "Thank you for making the phone work," he said, and the inhuman semitone in his voice kept him going: "I can't do this."

Elle ate a little piece of yellow bread and waited for him to continue.

"Can you do it?"

She didn't understand.

"Will's friends said you can do it."

She still didn't understand.

Jonathan retreated behind his eyelids again because he was a coward. "You can kill people."

A phantom Nancy slapped him across the face, shocking his eyes back open with the flick of a notebook page. There had been lavender in her pillows.

"No," Elle said.

"You can't do it, or you won't?"

"Both."

Mike kicked Nicole's dead phone out of his way and fell to a crawl to project his voice under the bed: "Will. Some retarded friend of Steve's stole Nancy's gun and he's being a retard with it. Come on, we can go out the window."

"Nancy has a gun?"

"*Had* a gun."

"Why don't you stay down here instead?"

"I can't, I have to go."

"What if the retarded guy sees you out there? What if he shoots you?"

"He won't," but Mike didn't technically know that.

"There's room for at least three more people to stay in here," Will said.

Another day, Mike might have accepted the invitation. "I can't. I'm

going. Don't make any noise."

"Thanks for the advice but I kinda know what I'm doing."

Will had a point. So did Mike. "Get out as soon as it's safe enough, okay?"

"I know."

People were arguing in the front room but Mike didn't have the space in his head to listen to what they were saying. He pulled the cord on Nicole's bamboo blind, shoved up the window and kicked out the screen.

"Hey Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Jonathan said there's no Deomogorgon. He's just sick. We've got time to find him."

How sick? How much time? How long had it taken Barb's face to unglue from her head? "I won't wig out if you won't," Mike said.

"Deal."

Mike sat down on the sill, swung his legs out, slid out into the cold, stomped directly on the screen because it really did not matter, and ran for Steve's car. The folded sheet of typewriter paper in his pocket crinkled at every bend of his leg.

mike i care snow ball no place like home not safe bad men secret

That was all it said, and it said everything. Mike had memorized it while Nancy was yelling, before the phone crashed to the floor. Now the message looped in his head with the turning of his legs, spitting out another word for each beating footstep.

bad men secret mike i care snow ball no place like home not safe bad men secret mike i care

Steve's headlights were off. The tires were flat, drooped into sad

semicircles on the road, but that didn't matter any more than the screen. Mike could get home fast. He'd been practicing. He caught himself with both hands on the freezing cold ledge of the trunk and tried to pull it open, but of course it was locked. The nearest rear door was locked too. So was the driver's door. So were the other two doors, and all the windows were rolled up.

"Seriously?"

Mike dropped a halfhearted hand on the nearest window. He looked back at the house. Steve was leaning on the front curtain making wild gestures, raising his voice, muffled, rambling. It was not safe to interrupt. This was bad.

Mike hopped back and forth between his feet, stuck. His bike was locked up in the trunk and Steve had the keys, but Steve and Nancy were in the middle of an argument with a lethally armed retard.

Will's mom was home, but she was passed out from a sleeping pill, maybe even more than one. What was it like to take a sleeping pill? Mike bet it was like taking cough syrup or allergy medicine but for adults, which meant it would be even stronger. He bet if he woke her up and told her what was going on she would get really upset and not be able to think straight. What if she ran into Nicole's house? What if she got shot?

Mike had to get home. He had to get Lucas on his radio and then get Dustin, or maybe bypass home totally in case he woke his parents—Could he even get back into Nancy's window by himself? —and they had to come up with a plan. Maybe one of the guys knew where Hopper lived, or something else, anything else. The police? What if they shot somebody? What if more bad men found out about Elle and *they* shot somebody?

Mike couldn't do this himself. He couldn't strategize all by himself. He couldn't even get his stupid *bike* by himself.

Wait, yes he could.

It took him three tries to smash Nancy's rock through Steve's rear passenger window.

"Blame it on the retard," he mumbled.

He took off his coat and wrapped it around his arm to safely clear more glass out of the way, shredding lycra with no regrets, and pulled up the front passenger lock. Leaning in through that door to the dashboard, he patted around until he was pretty sure he found the right thing to pull and pulled it. It wasn't the right thing, so he pulled another thing and the trunk popped open.

He closed the trunk very carefully after retrieving his bike so he wouldn't make any more noise, and just then, as he was listening closely to the silence in fear of breaking it, he heard a roar of rage, Nancy's rage, angrier than he had ever heard her in his whole annoying little brother life.

Steve wasn't in the window anymore. It was really hard to see through the curtain, but there was movement. A lot of it.

Everyone was in that house—Nancy, Steve, Will, Jonathan, *Eleven*—and Mike was running away?

"Screw leaving." Mike dumped his bike on the ground and jogged back toward Nicole's bedroom window. "Screw it, screw it, screw it." If Elle could hit typewriter keys from the upside down, she could do other things too. It would be good to talk to her. *Really* good. He might even get to see her again.

Mike stopped, nearly tipping forward over his toes, and boomeranged back to the car. By the time he returned to Nicole's bedroom window he had shaken all the bits of glass off Nancy's backpack.

Tommy turned away from Mike's retreating feet in the hallway and eyebrowed Nancy with a mixture of pity and glee. "You really think I'd hurt some kid? Don't you know it's all about you? You're the star of the show."

Nancy spoke along a very flat line: "We just want to leave. That is all we want."

"Well yeah, obviously." Carol's eyeroll moved her whole head,

sweeping her hair through the carpet. "Because you know you did something wrong."

"Nicole said it's fine!" Steve threw his hand out toward the door. "She said we can leave!"

Nicole stood against the door, clutching the strap of the messenger bag hanging from her shoulder. She raised her eyebrows even higher than Tommy's, looked at the gun in Tommy's hand, looked at Nancy, and shook her head.

"Guilty as charged," said Carol.

Nancy locked her jaw. "That. Isn't. Why. We want. To leave."

Reddened from her inverted position, Carol hauled herself up, stretched her body out along the sofa cushions and meweled. "Really, princess? Then why?" She feigned a loud yawn. "Why are you so desperate to get out of here?"

"How 'bout because your boyfriend's waving a gun around in her face? Did ya think of that, Carol?" Steve bounced on the windowsill, popping a curtain ring off the rod. "Tommy, for God sakes Tommy, I didn't even know you were still pissed at me. Why couldn't you talk to me at school or something? It was a month ago, a whole month."

"Because I'm a good guy, that's why." Tommy had moved to the front of the hallway. He leaned against one wall with a foot up on the wall opposite him, denying all passage. "I was gonna let it go, man. I did let it go. I was waiting for you to open your eyes. And then instead, you helped miss two-shoes here mess with another one of my friends."

"Yeah, what the hell Nancy?" said Carol, swinging her feet to the floor and sitting up. "What the hell did Nicole ever do to you but try to protect you from a stalker? And now you break into her house with a gun? Were you going to shoot her if she didn't let you leave? How much money did you take? Did you find her mom's jewelry too? Nicole's mom is dead, you know that right?"

Nancy put her back to the wall between Tommy and Nicole, wishing

she could sink backwards into it and disappear. She understood it now, the leaning.

"No answer? *What a shocker*," Carol said.

"I saved your ass, man." Tommy punched the air with the barrel of the gun, pointing it directly at Steve, driving Nancy toward the window, and it didn't matter how forbiddingly Steve looked at her—she wasn't the one Tommy was the most angry with right now. If she was in the middle, Tommy was less likely to shoot anyone at all. Probably. Maybe. Hopefully.

"I tried to stop psycho Byers beating the shit out of you because I knew it was gonna go bad but your dumb ass blew me off like it was some friggin TV western, and I *still* stuck around 'til you needed me to drag you off the ground. You could hardly walk. You were this close to cuffs, this close to Game Over. It would all have been over for you, do you realize that? What do you think Daddy Harry would've done to you if I hadn't been there for you, huh?"

Nancy made it, but Steve pushed her aside with the back of his arm. "Oh get off it. You were covering for your own vandal ass. You're welcome for the cleanup by the way."

"Hey screw you, man. First I tried to save you from her. Then I tried to save you from the psycho. Then I actually managed to save you from the cops *and* your daddy. I thought we were friends, you know? But nah, you had to get yourself pussywhipped by some—"

"Watch your *mouth*."

"—cheating *slut*," and Tommy snorted at the stomp of Steve's foot. "Oh meh-meh, 'You guys never liked her,' meh-meh, as if we owed her something."

"She actually cares about people'? Like we don't? We cared about *you*, Steve." Carol gripped the sofa cushion on which she sat. "You blind moron."

Tommy pointed at Nancy for a second, pulling Steve's arm in front of her. "But this one here, you think she gave a shit while she was

screwing around on you? You don't screw around on someone you care about, Stevie. Stevie Wonder."

"That's *not*—"

"Shut up, Nancy," Carol snapped. "I've never been with another guy and I don't think I'll ever be with another guy, because I'm not a phony goody-girl slut. I love Tommy. I don't screw around on him and sure wouldn't risk getting him thrown in jail for burglary."

"Thanks babe, I'm honored. Stevie Wonder and his sidekick Goody Two Face here could learn a lot from you."

"Would you quit that already?" said Steve. "Would you quit it with the names?"

"But that *is* your name. There's Spiderman, Superman," Tommy counted on his fingers with the barrel of the gun in place of his pointer, "The Green Lantern, The Great Stevie Wonder. Blind Stevie Wonder thinks he's such a goddamn hero he doesn't even need his friends."

"Alright! Okay! Fine! I'm a screwup!" Steve's hands went everywhere, "I go left I screw up, I go right I screw up, I go up, I go down, I screw up wherever I go because that's what I do. I'm very sorry but I'm just not worthy. Happy? Can we go now?" He got up and stood in front of Nancy. She took his hand to stop him going any further. It was shaking.

"She can," Tommy said. "She can go far away and never come back. But you? Stay. Have a beer with us, we've got three left." Tommy eyed Steve down the barrel. "Shoot the shit. I'd rather not invite any cops here."

"Hey... Hey." Steve turned to Nancy and ducked his head to make meagre privacy. "Maybe you should, yeah? Why don't you get going?"

"But you said they don't listen t—"

"I can talk them down." He squeezed her hand. "I'll take care of it. Get some help. He needs your help."

I'll take care of it.

"Nancy." Pain sparked in Nancy's bones as Steve's grip crushed her scratched-up scar against itself. "He would agree with me." He was begging her. It was in the eyes a little and in the silence a lot: he was begging her and he was right.

You don't have to do this, but she may as well have already started cutting, I'm just saying, you don't have to—

"He? He who? He ho? Ho who? Who's he?"

"*Oh,*" came Carol's breathy squeal, "*Jonathan!*"

Nancy would not cry in front of these people. She would not.

"We've been here a while, honey," explained Kindergarten Teacher Carol. "Why don't you stay for circle time, hmm? You can tell us everything, just like you promised Nicole a minute ago." Her lip protruded. "Otherwise Nicole might have to involve the authorities."

There was another telephone on the wall at the far end of the hallway, just below the teasing pendulous tail of a Kit Cat clock. "Call them!" Nancy shouted.

The drama bounced an invisible candy ping-pong ball between Tommy Carol, from sofa to hallway and back again. "Okay, I have got to hear this now," said Tommy.

"Come on guys. Let Nancy go home, we'll talk."

"No leaving. No phone calls." The gun had by now become Tommy's prosthetic pointer finger. "Sit."

"Pfk. This is stupid. We're outta here." Steve dropped Nancy's hand and made for the door. "It's not like you'd actually use that thing."

Nancy turned cold. "Steve don't—"

"Nicole's been through enough," Tommy warned. "Don't even think about touching her. Don't escalate this."

Nicole stood a little straighter against the door.

Steve didn't touch her.

Instead he laced his fingers behind his neck and paced an oval between Nicole and Tommy. "This is insane," he said. "We have to leave. You don't understand. You *can't* understand."

"Sit the hell down, man. Don't you come near any of us again."

"What, on the floor? You want me to sit on the floor?"

"Yeah, both of you."

"Circle time," Carol sang.

Fine. Fine fine fine *fine*. Nancy dropped obediently to her butt and sat Indian style just like circle time. If the truth could work in the junk shop and could almost work on Nicole it could work here too. It had to work. There was no other choice. "Jonathan is *dying*. We need to *go*." She jammed her finger into the carpet. "He just phoned us here from another dimension because he was infected with something terrible by a monster we were hunting last month. The infection took him away and we need to go get him or he'll die. He is all alone. He could die *tonight*." She blinked away everything she could. "I know it."

Tommy and Carol's candy ping-pong ball bounced between them a few more times and exploded into a firework of laughter. "That is amazing," Tommy said. "That really is amazing. Another dimension. Did you come up with that whole thing right now?"

Carol turned her fists under her eyes. "*Dyyiiinng*."

Nancy found her claws.

Kek-kek-kek-kek-kek—

She didn't know she had propelled herself from the floor until she was dangling in the air by her waist. Then Steve was crushing her, smothering her, praying into her ear, "*—please please please, just please, gun, please.*"

Okay, Nancy wanted to say, but she couldn't find words. Her throat was sore. *Okay, I'm fine*. Steve gave her feet back to her and let her breathe again, but kept a forearm around her shoulders.

"God, she actually believes it." There was disquiet in Carol's disgust, a small comfort.

Tommy drew circles beside his head and whistled. A hint of sympathy dulled his amusement. "Damn Steve, turns out you really do have a thing for the crazy, huh?" He cleared his throat, but his voice stayed rough. "You're right, I can't understand. I'm not even gonna try. But I can raise you."

Carol cracked her gum. "Come on Nicole, give us a true one. Show Steve the light before these schitzos drag him under."

Jonathan chewed his thumbnail until he encountered a nasty acidic morsel and spat it out.

His little corner folded him up comfortably with his back to the wall, his head tipped into the joint and his feet on the side of the desk. The position held all his limbs cozy under his scratchy blanket and he didn't even have to try. No wonder Will liked hiding. Small spaces were big hugs for lonely people.

The rest of the room had grown enormous. The bed was a cheesecloth cliffside, and the distant dresser, bearing its twin magazine stacks, rose up as a mountainous horned cathedral. The ceiling had become a real sky from which the projected moon's blond light outshone the rot, imbuing the place with the deep turquoise of a nighttime aquarium. Jonathan's nausea ebbed and flowed with the rhythm of a shoreline, and while he knew he was breathing, he couldn't really feel it.

Elle was enormous too, but that was an illusion sown by her magic and her oversized pink jacket. Even towering above him in her chair she was still just a kid with sticks for legs, a newly hatched tortoise in a big old shell, growing into the hand-me-downs of the gods all on her own.

"Why aren't you wearing your mask?"

Elle didn't open her eyes. "I don't like it anymore."

"But you'll get sick like me."

She shrugged one shoulder.

Jonathan pushed his blanket down over his knees. He unzipped his jacket, unbuttoned his flannel, pulled up his t-shirt and felt around, spilling his cold popsicle stick fingers over himself and digging them in like tombstones. When he found the deep lump below his ribcage it convulsed and shuddered, losing its numbness to pins and needles as it awakened from its restlessly vibrating sleep.

Elle had been watching him find it.

"Can you get it out of me?"

It took her forever to say it again: "No. It's too smart."

"What's that mean?"

Elle scooted her chair away and sat down on the floor next to Jonathan's accordioned legs, meeting him at eye level. She held her arm out over him, and with the other hand she pulled a tab on the cuff of her sleeve. It made a ripping noise: velcro.

She sandwiched it back together and pulled it apart again.

The horrible implications of the tearing sound introduced Jonathan to a new cluster of nerves in his back and elevated the whine a few octaves, turning the pins and needles into teeth and rapiers. Another sneeze grated his sinuses and made his head heavy, so he fell to rest in the corner again. "What if you really concentrate?"

Elle's hands landed on her knees. "No."

"... And take your time?"

"No. Can't."

"How can you know that for sure?"

Her mouth trembled. Her head fell. Her pompom danced and her hands wrestled. A tear fell out of her eye, through the darkness and into her lap with the glint of a falling star.

"Why don't you think you can do it? You think it's your fault, you think you'll mess up?"

She sniffed.

Jonathan's next breath struck him as hard as a salt sack full of razorblades. "You said—" He borrowed strength from his arms to keep talking. "You said you made me the monster too. That means it can't be my fault—that's why you feel bad. Right? So if you're the monster, I bet someone did the same thing to you. I bet it's their fault, not yours. I bet they should feel a lot worse."

Elle's voice was a little bell again: "You don't understand."

He could try. "Sometimes other people change us, and we have to take responsibility for it even though it's not our fault. I get that. But knowing we're a little messed up—that doesn't mean we have to call ourselves monsters. We don't have to let anybody call us monsters. It's good enough to be sorry."

"Mike said I'm not the monster."

"I hear he's. A pretty smart guy."

"He doesn't understand either."

"Nobody does, right?"

Elle rubbed her palms over her hidden face.

"Maybe if. If you didn't think you were the monster. Then you could do it."

Elle was still.

Jonathan didn't know how to ask for her hand so he just took it.

"Here. It's this. It's just small." He put her fingertips right about where the lump was and pressed them down on it. She immediately yanked her hand back as if the pincushion had pricked her too, and waved it really fast, and touched it again, and waved even more emphatically.

"Secret," she said. "Why?"

"What, the buzzing? It's not a secret." He gulped. "...I guess I forgot to mention it."

"*Why?*" What was she—angry, happy? Both? She poked him too hard, knifing him with a fingertip. "Stupid."

"Sorry."

"*Stupid.*" She shut her eyes and formed a line between her faint eyebrows. "Explain."

"It gets quiet sometimes. Like when I was talking to Will. It started at the woods. When I was killing the woods. And now whenever I get... *scared*, actually, it starts... humming and screaming, like—"

"Jonathan." There were galaxies in her big brown baby eyes. "*You broke it.*"

Hope fluttered up and blanketed the razorblades with its wings. "Can you get it out?"

Elle searched her pockets and fished out a yellow ball. Her frantic fingers peeled away layers of cellophane, revealing the grid lines of a prized peach made of squashed Eggo waffles. "Help me. Be scared." She brought the doughball to her mouth and tore away a huge bite.

"You want me to what?"

"Vee scaret," said Elle's full mouth.

"But I was just starting to feel better."

"Helt we." She had hardly chewed yet. "Vee scaret. Oo haf to."

The invader got quieter and quieter as a silent laugh tickled its edges.

"You're not serious," Jonathan said.

But she was. With one chipmunk cheek puffed out and two crumby lips, Elle was dead serious. She swallowed. "I can get it if you're scared."

10. ten

10.

Mike couldn't get back into Nicole's bedroom window. He should have been able to, but every time he ran enough momentum up the wall and pulled, his weight turned his arms to jelly. It was as if he still had Barbara's glasses in his hand. He must have tried twenty times by now. "Will," he said to the window. "Will, I'm back. Are you still here? I can't climb in."

Will's dark head and bright eyes appeared in the corner. "I've seen you climb way higher things."

"I'm having a bad memory from the pool and the body. From the upside down. It's stopping me."

"So put it over there."

"Huh? Put it where?"

"You know, over there. You know where." Will looked down at him curiously. "Haven't you done it before?"

"No."

"Oh. Okay, well, it doesn't really matter where you put the memory, just put it there so it's not here."

"Well I need to think of somewhere." Somewhere like a trash can, or the big dumpster behind the school, or the sewer. Mike wanted to flush it all down the toilet.

"How about the fort in your basement? Put it in there."

"But I like it there." Mike didn't want Elle sleeping next to Barb's dead body, not even in his imagination.

"Then you should definitely put it there. I put mine in Jonathan's room. The worst parts dissolve after a while."

"Really?"

"Trust me, I know what I'm doing." Will put his hand out. "Need a boost?"

"That's okay, I can do the rest myself."

Will got out of the way.

Mike closed his eyes and pulled the pool to the front of his head. He picked out the leech, the smell, the sponge, the vanilla pudding, the rolling eyeball, the glasses and the dry ice, and held a deep breath on them. He backed away a few paces, balled them all up between his hands as if he was crumpling a piece of wastepaper, ran toward the window, threw the ball of paper into the fort, and in a puff of surprise, Elle caught it and pulled the bedsheet down over the door with a soft *Burrrrp*.

Mike tipped over the sill and into the room with plenty of momentum to spare, so he just kept moving. He closed the bedroom door on the yelling, he took Will's blanket off the bed and stuffed it along the crack under the door, he closed the window and dropped the bamboo blind, then he took the shade off the lamp. The lamp was dark but still hot, so he used his sweater sleeve as an oven mitt to unscrew the bulb and switched it out with the safelight from the nightstand drawer. He turned it on, put it on the floor and turned off the overhead light. The room turned red, except for a crack of white light coming in from the top of the door. Not quite good enough.

"What are you doing?"

"Making a dark room." Mike took off Nancy's backpack and put it by the lamp on the floor.

"You got the camera?"

"Yeah." Mike loaded the typewriter with a new piece of paper from the stack beside it and put it on the floor with everything else. "You said there's room under there?"

"Lots."

A few strands of Mike's hair got caught when he climbed under the bed but he let them rip out and just kept going until he was on his belly next to Will with his tools within reach. He pulled the red light under the bed near their faces, turning Will into a squinting devil. When he took the camera from the bag he discovered there was no latch on the back where he imagined one would be. "Do you know how to open it?"

Will reached over, pushed a button on the bottom, turned a crank on the top left around and around until Mike felt a click, and then pulled the crank's lever up. The back popped open and there was the film, all rolled up and waiting for Mike to do something he had always been told he should never, ever do: he tugged the tab sticking out of the canister and began to unwind the roll.

Will shuffled close and leaned on Mike's shoulder so he could see. "Christmas," he said. "Please don't wreck these."

"I'm not going to wreck them." Mike had forgotten negatives were in the negative. It was hard to tell what he was looking at. There was a bright red Christmas tree on a black background, a freakishly dark-faced Will with red hair holding big present, a light table with dark dishes, Will's mom with red hair and black teeth, some kind of black slop falling off a spoon. Mike rushed through Christmas morning and a closeup of a red sphere with black reflections all over it, and came upon a sideways picture of Jonathan laying spaced out on a pillow. Someone else had been behind the camera for this one.

"What are you looking for, anyway?"

The message in Mike's pocket reminded him, *secret*. "Clues," he said. Proof.

The next one looked alarmingly normal—it was as red as the others, but it wasn't in the negative. Elle stood in the middle of the Byers' front porch with a hat on her head and a gas mask in her hand. Mike brought the tiny image of her face as close to his eye as his focus would let him. She looked a little upset, but she was okay. She was definitely okay. Not only was she alive, she was *okay*. He kicked his

feet around to keep his Christmas joy off his face.

Following an image of a black cloudy moon in a red sky, there she was again, and again, and again, walking down an overgrown road in a series of blurry shots that looked like they had been taken blind. The rest of the film was blank, unused. It was over but Mike's feet kept on bouncing, toes to floor and heels to bed, *whunk whunk whunk*.

"Is that Eleven? She's in here with Jonathan?"

"Yeah." Now that the news was out Mike could finally smile, and once he started he couldn't stop. "Don't tell anyone about her, okay? It has to stay a secret."

Nodding groovily, Will eased the camera and the ribbon of film from Mike's hands and began rewinding. "I know how to talk to them. We can ask her to use her superpowers to get Nancy's gun back from those jerks so everyone can leave."

"Uh huh." Mike grabbed the typewriter, and a loud noise exploded in the living room.

Jonathan looked up to the haloed flashlight moon for an answer to a question he couldn't articulate. A simpler one replaced it: "If this works, will it send me back?"

"Maybe."

While he kept his hopes low on purpose, practicality reigned. "Don't go into my room like you used to. Not unless the music's on—loud, on the stereo. I have to be by myself most of the time. It's not personal, it's just me, okay? Promise?"

"Promise. Don't tell Will. Or Mom. Secret."

"Promise. And it's okay if you mess up."

Elle's throat rattled. "No it's not."

"Listen."

She understood that what Jonathan meant by 'listen' was 'look at me.'

"Are you sorry? Do you really mean it?"

"Yes."

"Then it's okay if you mess up. Do your best."

She nodded, put her hand on him and waited for him to scare himself.

"Will it hurt?"

"Yes."

The thing churned out a cicada's call at that, so Jonathan embraced it. It weakened. She had probably just lied to scare him anyway. It died out completely. "This could take a while," he said.

The spring he was eight, Jonathan had found a cloud of squirming tadpoles in a flooded ditch far from his house. When he reached into the water they bumped jelly kisses all over his curious hand, so he played a while, making friends. He wanted to take some home to watch them turn into frogs but he didn't have anything to put them in, and as he sat there pondering his predicament he spotted their mother—at least, he imagined it was their mother, and he imagined that although she was only the size of a bottlecap she would still make a cool pet. He took off his sock to use it as a bag and nudged her into it, and tucked the cuff of the sock into his back pocket with the toe dangling out so she wouldn't get squished. Then he rode his rusty bike home and headed straight for the shed to find a bucket.

In the shed, he took the sock from his pocket and pushed the toe up into the cuff to check the inside. Something had gone wrong. A pink veiny jelly ball the size of the frog's head had gotten stuck to the fibers near her mouth. Her eyesockets were empty. He buried her in the woods. Nine years later he was still ashamed.

Jonathan put himself inside the sock, where he knew Elle's best would not be good enough. She was just a nervous kid, not a surgeon, more likely to turn him inside out than help him. She was going to rip his throat out in ragged strips. Jonathan was about to die spewing

bloody geysers onto this rotting nowhere-floor, ushered away to nothingness by the sobbing of a young girl forever changed by an innocent mistake.

At least you know it's coming.

Nancy's arm shot out from the forest porthole so Jonathan grappled with the memory, seizing the opportunity to fight the tug of war all over again. He crushed Nancy's slimy little hand in his. He cracked her shoulder. The closing burrow pinched in, strangling her around the middle, so he pulled harder, so hard he snapped her spine, tore her in two, dumped her intestines into the dirt and fell back holding her, half of her, her torso lighter than a toy, her blood like hot soup spilled in his lap, her stuffing strung up to what was left of her in the hole, entrails melding into meaty moss and biosludge.

He couldn't apologize to her. She didn't even know she had been wronged. As the confusion in her eyes turned to glass the monster in his middle surged to an uproar, which was a promise that Elle could save his life, which meant he might have a chance to wrap Nancy up tight in his arms and legs and keep her safe and whole again someday, which filled him with a shining silence purer than kindness.

Jonathan had failed, utterly.

"I wish you kept it a secret," he said. "I'd be able to stay scared if I didn't know how it worked." He put his headphones back on to magnify what was left of the noise, to chase it, to feed it, but as he stoked it—*because* he stoked it—it wisped to silence, extinguished. Trying to be afraid was futile. Aside from his exhaustion, Jonathan felt better than he had felt all day. It was awful. "It's not working. I can't stay scared."

"AAAHHHHH!" Elle screamed in his face at the top of her lungs. The startle whipped up a prickling hum which they promptly killed with infectious laughter. If only the problem had been hiccups.

"This is the worst thing that could ever happen to me," Jonathan said, giggling.

"Forget."

"I'm trying." How could he forget something like this? By dying and coming back to life again as someone else, maybe.

"Try again."

The moment the mortician lifted the sheet.

When the iron door trapped Will in the oven it exploded into flames.

He ran from the car to find his mom half-eaten beside the hole in the living room wall.

No, no, no. Each exercise frightened him less than the one before it and he saw beauty in every horror: in the marble veining of Will's counterfeit corpse, in the stark incomprehensibility of sudden loss, in the fact that his half eaten mom could only have died from a thousand defense wounds because while everybody was made out of meat, Joyce Byers was jerky.

None of it was real. Jonathan liked horror movies. He couldn't bluff his way through this one.

A similar catharsis had surprised him back when he and Nancy sliced their palms open to lure their mark. The butchering itself still screeched nails across his memory's slate, but a numb tranquility had settled through him as soon as it was done. The only thing bothering him while they wrung their seeping fists onto the rug had been the discovery that he had given Nancy the sharper knife.

Oh shut up, no you didn't. I just pushed harder than you did.

Jonathan stroked his scar where it stretched a tight parallel between headline and heartline, the way he did most nights to put himself to sleep. He had picked at the stitches incessantly while it healed, scolding himself and defying himself the whole way, drawing blood like it was some kind of achievement, and now it would never go away.

What would flighty Aunt Darlene think of this? Her eldest great nephew was a true palmist's mutant now.

How dismal—no life line at all. Be sure he doesn't jump off any bridges,

will you? It's a miracle he left the womb. Oh! Well, pardon me Joyce, my mistake to presume you would be interested in the shape of your own child's soul.

He would have to show it to her, give her a second chance to read him, if they ever visited the home again.

As much as his fresh cut had stung while he wrapped Nancy's in gauze, it tickled at the same time. The lips of the split had opened and closed playfully while he worked, eating up his anxieties by giving him somewhere to put them, steadyng his grip and his focus. Nancy must have felt the same way, or close to it—they had scheduled a man-eating beast to arrive any minute and yet they just sat there on the sofa playing doctor and holding hands.

How had he lost her? How had he gotten *so close*, and then lost her?

Stupid question.

By the time Steve came to bash the door down, they were—well, Jonathan had been about to—anyway, they had tested Nancy's theory and the blood hadn't baited anything into the house but a worried almost-ex boyfriend. Then Nancy threatened to blow Steve's head off for his own good, everyone was freaking out and *that* was when the living room turned bottom up—

Elle pulled her hand away.

Another whining startle in Jonathan's middle, another involuntary wave of relief to smother it. "Sorry." The housing over his ears made his voice stuffy in his head. "I haven't figured it out yet."

Elle scrambled to her feet, stalked to the hallway and stood there staring down it with her knees bent and her arm curved at her side. Her hand curled into a white-knuckled fist.

"Is something here?"

"No."

"What happened?"

When Eleven turned to look at him only her head moved, as if she was a doll, an angry automaton doll.

"Bad," she said.

Her arm straightened. Her thumb stuck out. The first two fingers uncurled from her fist, and she pointed them straight at Jonathan.

His headphones popped and hissed.

—nonononononono you stupid bitch how could you do that to her oh my god how could you shoot her my god you dumb bitch—

This time the whine kept on rising.

—you dumb bitch she just wanted to get him back you dumb bitch and you—you—you—you stupid pointless psycho bitch—

A knuckle cracked in Jonathan's stomach. Then another. A handful. A firing squad. A plague of locusts.

—you bitch you bitch you bitch you fucking bitch oh my God Nancy—

He whipped his headphones to the floor. They smashed to pieces before Steve could become an ant in a tin can.

Eleven had already walked away.

Jonathan tipped forward from the wall, landed on his elbows and crawled for the door as though he could leave the broken monster in the corner behind him, but it only chased him off his elbows and onto his face. It licked flames into his nostrils and raged against the backs of his eyes, shaking his vision, smearing it with grease.

He coughed to jar his voice back to the right frequency.

Elle. Now. I'm scared now.

It didn't work.

god how could you shoot her my god you dumb

He had to get away from this tireless thing, from this hopeless, hateful, howling thing, but it was already inside his brain.

'You risked your life! And Nancy's!'

Jonathan couldn't think. He was shaking through a seive.

'What if this thing took you too?'

He was dissolving.

I wanted to tell you, I jus—

The weight of the cave pressed down on his shoulders, cozy and permissive, and evil.

11. eleven

11.

Nicole's eyes flashed in the firelight of her hair. "You want a story?"

With nowhere else to go, Nancy drew into herself. She sat down beside the boys' softly ransacked bookshelf, pulled a fat phone book into her lap and flipbooked the corner, *braaaaaap*. Could she flip it loud enough to drown out an entire barrage of oncoming bullshit? She could try. Braaaap. *BRAAP*.

"It's Pulitzer time," Carol said on the way out of the kitchen. She handed Tommy a beer, opened her own with a popcorn pop and sat down on the armrest of the sofa.

"Or you could, y'know, not. Not tell any stories," Steve said. "That would be cool too." He stood in the middle of the living room perching a hand on his hip, ignored.

"Got one." Nicole's eyes settled down from their search through her head. "I think I was like nine. It started the way it always did, right: yelling, banging, on and on. What was I doing, messing with a bunch of flowers in the yard? I picked them for some reason, somebody. But anyway I dropped 'em and ran so I wouldn't miss it, and it was broad daylight, like the middle of the afternoon. So I get through the trees, I get to the big one I always hid behind at the side there, and she's just—Joyce, I mean, they come out and she's just *wailing* on him."

"On which one of 'em?" said Tommy.

"On Lonnie, who else? I mean she's like," Nicole gestured pinwheels with her arms. "Pap-pap-pap-pap, chasing him and he can't get away, she's so fast. She has him up against his pickup, he's all bent over trying to knock her hands away but it's like he's caught in a hurricane, right? And then Jonathan comes out of the house yelling

at her, just this kid my age but he sounded like he was as drunk as she was, and he's like 'Stop it Mom, he's leaving, let him go, he's leaving, wah wah,' right, but she's not having it, she's not listening. She's going *nuts*. So Jonathan grabs her shirt or something from behind—it was hard to see—and that's when Lonnie gets one in and knocks her right on her ass. Didn't punch her or anything, more like..." Nicole pushed out both her palms. "You don't fall down so hard from something like that unless you're trashed."

"Let me guess," Carol sarcasmed, "It wasn't over."

"Gee whiz babe, have you heard this one before?"

"What can I say, it never gets old."

Steve had begun pacing again. Tommy raised his beer toward him in a mocking toast, still blocking the hallway, still holding the gun in his other hand, with his finger still on the trigger. Steve took a hard turn away from him.

"So when Joyce is down, that's when Jonathan flips out so loud I almost ran away, and he starts trying to beat up his dad. But it was like—oh God." Nicole put her hand on her face. "He would have lost to a mouse. I try not to judge, you know? But wow. So he's wailing away, annoying the hell out of Lonnie who's basically just standing there waiting for him to get tired. Joyce is sitting on the ground lost in space or something and Jonathan doesn't let up. It's like he'll never get tired, so finally Lonnie just," Nicole swung her fist, "Bam. I mean *bam*."

"And it still wasn't over," Tommy said, and chugged.

Carol sighed musically. "How many times have we heard this?"

"Too few." Tommy tossed his can into the kitchen, where it clanged around in the sink. "Nicole plays the best reruns."

"Shh, you'll miss the best part," Carol said.

"So Jonathan hits the ground flat. Skids. And there's this silence, like even the birds shut up. Joyce is on her feet. She beelines for the bed of Lonnie's pickup and grabs his shotgun."

"Oh gnarly," Tommy said, even though this was a rerun.

"But she doesn't use it. She throws it on the ground, goes in there again and pulls out a—what was it, what did we figure it was?"

"I don't know," Carol said, "You're the one who was there."

"I swear it was some kind of—like a raccoon, or a possum or a cat. It was definitely a dead animal. Like roadkill, or something. She's got it by the legs. She swings it back over her shoulder. And she starts *beating Lonnie with a dead animal.*"

"We shouldn't be laughing." Tommy rubbed his eye.

"But it's so funny!" gasped Carol.

"Lonnie got in his pickup with blood all over his shirt, peeled out of there and Joyce must have thrown the thing at him as he drove away because she didn't have it anymore. That or it disintegrated."

"It shouldn't be funny," Tommy wheezed.

"But it is."

"A roadkill beating." Tommy slapped his thigh over and over. "It's like Loony Tunes."

Carol slipped off the arm of the sofa while holding her fists out together, one for each dead animal leg, and swung an air-beating all over Tommy, "*Pksh, pksh, pksh.*" He defended himself with ninja parries.

Nancy burned twin holes into the copper carpet.

I cried for a week.'

She sent herself back to the fourth grade and searched the classroom, the playground, the hallways for a kid with an unexplained black eye, but came up with nothing. She couldn't see him at all. She knew he was way up there at the top of the roll call, but the look of him had been lost to the wastebasket of unused memories a long time ago.

Steve sat down beside her, a hard thump ending with his forearms balanced on his knees. "I've got an idea," he mumbled, quieter than quiet, "I'm thinking if you get your end of the coffee table and I get mine we can put it through the window."

"I want to kill them," Nancy whispered.

"That's what I said: if you get Carol and I get Tommy we can put them through the window. And then we can use Nicole to clean up the mess."

"Hey Steve, you want a beer?"

"Hey Tommy, you wanna go fuck yourself?" The sudden change in volume hurt Nancy's ear. "You really think this is funny?"

"Yeah, I do. And so do you when you're not trying to impress the nutcase's nutcase. What happened to you, man? You're not even you anymore."

"Times change. Have we done ours yet or what? You gonna let us out of detention before sunrise?"

"Have you—what? Have you done your *time*? That's not how nuthouses work, my friend. You get out when you stop being psychotic. These people are seriously gonna ruin your life." Tommy flourished at Nicole like he was striking up a band. "Next."

Nancy closed her ears, opened her coat and pulled Barbara's glasses from the left breast pocket of her shirt. Jonathan's third eye had gotten her this far, so maybe Barb's four eyes could take her the rest of the way. The spiderweb of the shattered lens tried to slice her fingertips. She picked at the cracks. The gunk from the poison place may as well have been dried glue and the glasses were covered in it. Barbara Holland deserved so much better than this stinky shitty garbage. Everybody did. Even the bullies holding them hostage did. Maybe.

Chip chip flick chip flick.

Barbara must have been so scared. So, so scared. She had already been scared enough of normal things—scared to go to the Snow Ball

and scared to be left out of the Spring Fling, scared she wouldn't get her period and scared that she would, scared of starting high school and scared of not getting into the right college, scared of anything to do with sex, and most of all, terrified of losing Nancy.

It had been a live wire between them for months: Nancy was growing up faster. She was growing *out* of Barb. She knew it was happening because it had happened to other friends in the past, but the warning knell still came suddenly, without anything seeming to have changed on Nancy's side of the relationship. Barb just... started to get offended more often when they were talking. Not angry, but bothered. Defensive. Reluctant. Bossy. Confused. *This isn't you.*

Not her too, Nancy had scribbled in an isolated diary paragraph, with no one left to talk to because Mom wouldn't understand. *I won't lose her too*. She extended her hand every chance she got, determined to grow Barbara up alongside her, but most of the time her encouragements just shocked her, zapped her like a bolt of static charge dragged up from dry winter carpet, and Barb shrank away, wilting on the line, *No, Nance. I can't do that. Can we please just drop it?*

So Nancy would drop it, whether it was a dance, a boy, a new club, or a talent show with an open slot just the right size for a clarinet solo, but she never dropped Barb. She tried again next time. Little by little, it worked. Piece after piece, the shell cracked away to reveal new rays of Barb-tinted wisdom that might not have come out had Nancy not encouraged her to grow.

I mean it Nancy, don't ever trust Tommy and Carol. Steve's basically just an idiot, but they're dangerous. They could really hurt you. All they do is talk crap. I know they're already talking crap about me when we're not around, not that I care. But they'll end up talking a ton crap about you too if you let them. Don't give them anything to talk crap about.

Nancy and Barbara could have made it. That night at Steve's before Barb went mis—before she was killed, that was only a rough patch. She was nothing like Tommy and Carol. She just needed some help coming out of the cave, or if not that, some help being okay with Nancy leaving the cave, because *My God, Barb, how can it be so hard for you to accept that I WANT him in my pants?*

And Nancy needed Barb's help too, because people hiding in caves kept their vision adjusted to the dark.

Nancy unfolded the arms of Barb's glasses and held them up to her eyes.

Tommy and Carol really were monstrous people.

The truth had to be the way out of this, the kind of truth that wouldn't give them anything to talk crap about. That was Barb's advice. And sometimes the only way around a problem was to charge straight into it. That was Nancy's.

"I'm totally serious about the table." Steve slid his voice under an uproar, "Hundred percent serious. All he's ever wanted is to fly. Listen close, he's calling you." Nancy couldn't hear anything but obnoxious laughter. Then a squeak, "*Set me free Miss Nancy...*"

Around the corner the Kit Cat clock ticked on. Nancy picked at the gunked glasses in her lap again. If only she had time to think. If only she had her pile of open encyclopedias, textbooks, notebooks, hilighters, color-coded ballpoints and a bonus Jonathan curled up in a nest of pillows, sighing randomly in his sleep to redirect yet another stuck thought like a Magic 8-Ball. She had almost played with his hair. Twice.

"Mike's getting help," she said, but how long would that take? The clock became a torture device. How long had she been sitting here? An icicle pierced her. What if Jonathan had already gone ahead and—

"Your brother got his bike out of my car and left it on the ground."

"Then where is he?"

"I'm clueless as usual." Steve took a detour at Barb's glasses to play with the ring on Nancy's pointer finger. Deliberately, warmly, he rotated it full circle. "How about we turn this night around ourselves, yeah?"

Tommy shouted over Nicole to finish one of her sentences. Carol swatted his arm and corrected him. Nancy prided herself on failing to

register anything they said. What mattered was that Tommy was still a threat, and he and Carol had done the opposite of sobering up. "It's not safe," she said.

"Which is why we're gonna be fast. Pick it up, swing it back, out it goes, one two three. Let me lead. I'll lift you out first, you hit the ground running and we take the bike, 'K?"

Past Steve, the gossamer curtain had been pushed aside. The tiered wooden table before them looked like it weighed about two tons, but on the other hand the lathed legs went all the way to the top as if they were made to be handles. Nancy stretched a foot out and toed the corner of the table an inch across the floor. Accounting for the extra resistance as it caught on the shag carpet... about three tons. Whatever, this was happening. She put Barb's glasses back into the pocket over her heart. "Okay. When?"

Steve's eyes turned wild as he watched the others. Nancy crept up to a crouch and imagined she had springs in her legs, in her arms, in her back, and wound them up to make herself strong.

"... . . . Go."

One, Nancy heaved the table up a split second behind Steve, tipping it sideways along the way, spilling coasters and other kipple to the floor. Two, they swung it back in unison. "Hey, hey!" Three, Tommy hooked Nancy's elbow from behind, yanking her nearly off her feet, so that on the forward swing Steve pulled the table right out of her hands. Her corner hit the floor with a bang beside Steve's bare foot, then his corner fell from his hands and banged down too, but he kept his momentum, turned it around, bypassed Nancy and slammed it right into Tommy.

Tommy fell onto the sofa with a hand on his face. With *both* hands on his face. Then where was the—

Click-k-k.

As theatrical as Charlie's fourth angel, Carol flicked her hip to the side above parted feet and aimed at Steve. "Play nice. You okay hon?"

Tommy nodded while holding his wrist under his nose, smearing blood, but didn't stand up. His eyes were watering. "You wanna square this now? We're long overdue."

"Gimme another rain check," Steve said, rubbing his hand. "You know what I want."

Nicole looked on from her corner blocking the front door, spellbound. When she noticed Nancy staring at her she pulled her camera from her bag and hid behind it.

"Carol." Steve chopped both hands down to hold her attention. "There's only so much pissing on a guy's grave I can take. You can't change our minds, you won't teach us any lessons, so—"

"Don't tell me you believe it too." Tommy rasped, doubling over. "What the f—"

"It's all true." Steve shut his eyes and braced himself for the next part: "Everything Nancy said is true."

Nancy registered the sound of laughter along with the sight of falling snow on the list of beautiful things she would never enjoy again.

"My shoe!" Steve gestured wildly out the window. "There's a reason I'm only wearing one. You must have seen the other one in the road when you were messing with my car. I crushed a bug tonight and it burned a hole right through it and it's all connected. This town is screwed up in ways I can't explain but I'll prove it to you at some point. I'll prove it if you could just *chill out*."

"There's no shoe out there, Stevie. Are you seriously this messed up? What the hell did they do to you? Hypnosis? You need some sense beaten into you or what?"

"No. Tommy. Damn it. How many have you had? This is taking way too long."

"The Byers Crazy really is catching." Carol threw her head back and sighed, holding the elbow of her gun arm. "First he screwed it into the princess, then he beat it into Steve and now they're breaking into houses."

"Where is that lunatic, anyway? Hiding in his lair while you do his bidding? You screwing him too Steve?" Tommy got to his feet and chattered his teeth under a bloody Chaplin moustache. "Didja-didja catch queer?"

Steve was disgusted. "That doesn't even make sense. Is he screwing Nancy or is he queer? Losers."

"Maybe he's both," Tommy said, poking Steve in the chest. There was no room for Nancy to get between them. "Maybe he's just." Poke. "That." Poke. "Weird."

"Yeah what if he was?" Steve shot back, "So what?"

Tommy fell away holding his head while Carol spewed a whistling laugh into her hand. "They *are* screwing," she said. "They're all screwing! It's like some perverted B-and-E sex cult."

"Ha!" Tommy bounced up to Carol on wobbly legs and humped her hip. "Break and *enter*. They break into houses to screw in. That's what it is. You cracked the case, you cute little genius." He planted a big kiss on her cheek and left a red smudge.

"A queer sandwich with a syrupy slut centre." Carol honed in on Nancy. "You people are messed. Up." She lowered the gun and strolled so-casually forward. "And you know," she added, grabbing Nancy's chin and wagging it, "She does look kind of like a man, so..."

Nancy slapped Carol's hand away. "All you do is talk crap," she spat. "You and Tommy talk crap and assume the worst about everyone else, even the people you think you care about, so you never have to look at yourselves." She shrugged Steve's hand off her arm. It was time for this to end. She could end it herself. "You think hating everyone else means you love each other but the only thing you really love about Tommy is that he makes you feel good about yourself, because—because—you know what you are, Carol?"

"Hey uh Nancy what if you didn't—"

Carol cut Steve off by poking him with the gun, stinging him and giving Nancy a silent heart attack, then hummed phony sympathy

and pointed down at the floor again. "This is going to be suuuper interesting, since you're such a smart special girl and all." She chomped her gum like a cow and waited for Nancy to make good.

Nancy's heart pounded against Barbara's glasses. "You're a bitch." Carol didn't react. "You are a nasty, mean, judgmental *bitch*."

"Oh really?"

"Yeah," Nancy said. "Why don't you go fuck yourself?"

Carol giggled. "Well you know what I think?"

"What."

"I think that's a really cute necklace, princess."

Carol fired.

It didn't hurt at first. It was only a blunt kick, so that on the way to the floor Nancy wondered where Carol had gotten such big loud feet, but what Nancy fell into was softer than the floor, higher than the floor, had to be Steve, Steve putting her to rest amid a flapping rain of softly ransacked books.

"Carol." Tommy was not laughing. "What did you just do?"

A hot current flowed down Nancy's shin and into her mom's shoe while Steve spittled a panic attack a foot away, "—how could you do that to her oh my god how could you *shoot* her my god you dumb bitch—" and the blood was soaking through her jeans, dripping from the cuff to the carpet, and Steve was, what? Was he washing his hands in it? "—you dumb bitch she just wanted to get him back you dumb bitch and you— you— you— stupid pointless psycho bitch—"

Carol's gasp was shrill and lengthy. "I didn't mean it! I didn't mean to, I was just trying to scare her! It was an accident! I was aiming for the space between her feet, you know, to... make her dance."

"—you bitch you *bitch*—" Steve tore denim as if it were paper.

"Babe like holy—Like holy, holy—What? Now what do we do?"

"—you bitch you fucking bitch oh my God Nancy Jesus you're crazy why are you so damn stupid okay I got it, I think. I think." Steve found the hole under Nancy's bent leg in her calf and, pinning her foot with his knee for leverage, plugged it up using the heel of his hand. "I got it." *Then* it hurt. Nancy yelled at him and tried to pull him away but he didn't listen. "You're okay!" He fought off her frantic hands and caught them both in one. "You're okay. Stop."

Outnumbered, Carol placed the gun on the floor and backed away from it. "I'm... sorry?"

A bright white flash filled the room, and then another, extending long shadows from the front door. The dim light over Nicole's head flickered. She took another picture. The power went out and came back on.

A gust of ethereal wind picked Carol up, blew her across the room and hammered her to the wall by the kitchen, pinning her along the seam at the ceiling. Her feet kicked thunder into wallpaper and stucco as she grabbed at her throat, and the lightning of Nicole's photojournalism flashed on and on.

12. twelve

12.

Mike swam out from under the bed and opened the door while kicking the blanket away at the same time. In the confusion he caught his foot, slipped and whacked the back of his head hard enough on the floor to make himself realize he was about to run into the middle of something really, really bad.

That hadn't sounded like a gunshot from movies. It had sounded like a gunshot that killed people for real.

Steve was babbling on and on like the gunshot had killed someone for real.

Mike was going to kill someone for real. He catapulted around the doorknob.

Nancy was awake, Steve was holding her leg in bloody hands and the gun was on the floor while everyone sat there in flashing light, staring agape at the ceiling as if it was playing a horror movie. The horror movie was the retard's horizontal girlfriend kicking and slapping and elbowing the wall. Mike's volcanic joy washed over him in a confusing thrill of gooseflesh. *Elle. Eleven. Eleveneleveneleveneleveneleven.*

He lunged out and confiscated the gun. The retard started laughing. What was he laughing at? Wasn't that his girlfriend getting squashed into the ceiling?

Uh. Wasn't that Mike's girlfriend squashing the retard's girlfriend into the ceiling?

"Elle!" This wasn't how you kept secrets! This wasn't how you hid from the bad men! What was she thinking? How could anyone alive

be so shitty at hiding? "Elle! Elle, what are you doing? Eleven!" The hall's doorways became monkey bars as Mike swung along to check each empty room. "Elle! I took the gun! It's safe! You can let her go!"

Eleven wasn't anywhere. Was she still in the upside down? Mike ran back to the living room. The retard got up, grabbed at his girlfriend's clothes and tore her jacket open. An invisible bomb blew him backwards over an upturned coffee table where he landed on his back, his legs in the air, howling with unnatural laughter.

"Elle, stop! Stop it!" Standing at the end of the hallway, Mike planted one foot far in front of the other and held on to the corner of the living room wall in case Eleven tried to throw him again too. "Stop it! Stop! She won't hurt anybody!" The girl wasn't kicking much anymore. Her white boots slowed to an irregular rumble. She gurgled. "What are you doing?" Was Eleven actually going to kill her for real? "*What is wrong with you?*"

The girl's hand slipped down from her throat and dangled there.

"ELEVEN!"

Her head tilted to a grotesque angle.

"MURDERERS AREN'T ALLOWED IN TO THE SNOW BALL!"

The girl rolled down the wall. When she hit the floor she bounced, once. "Babe— Carol— babe—" The retard shoulder-checked the wall above her and fell to his knees directly on her fanned hair. She screamed and choked, and started coughing the same throaty barking coughs that Holly coughed when she had croup. He got off her hair, pulled her to lay across his lap and rocked her with his arms over her, shielding her.

"Hello," Mike said.

The red-nosed retard gazed up at him emptily. "Are you a wizard?"

"Yes. I'm a wizard." Mike hooked his finger around the outside of the trigger-guard so it wouldn't go anywhere stupid and aimed, weavingly, at Mr. and Mrs. Retard. "I'm also just a little kid. I'd shoot you in the leg but I've never even held a gun before. The bullet could

hit you anywhere. It could get you in the head."

"Michael you put that down right now!"

"Kid hold on Mike listen Mike hey—"

"SHUT UP! What's your name, douche?"

"Tommy."

"Which one of you shot my sister?"

"Me," Tommy said, holding up a defensive hand while Carol barked on and on in his lap. "Me, I did it. It was me."

Yeah right. Eleven wouldn't go after the wrong person. "You're a retard," Mike said. "You're both retards." The redhead by the door—Nicole—took another picture. "STOP IT!" She jumped and lowered the camera from her eye. How many pictures had she just taken of Elle's superpowers? How many had she taken of Elle in the upside down? "Pull the film out and expose it. All of it."

Nicole's shoulders dipped back. She put the camera in her bag, lengthened her neck, crossed her arms and looked haughtily down at him. "No," she said.

"Do it!"

"No!"

"I'm pointing a gun at you!"

"I don't care!"

Well, this was over. "Fine." Mike aimed at the floor and fiddled with the chamber of the gun the way Nancy had. "Don't go anywhere, okay? Nobody go anywhere." When he got it open he dumped the bullets into his hand and stuck them in his pocket.

Nicole darted around Tommy and Carol, around Mike, straight down to the end of the hall, and picked up the phone under the cat clock. "It's not working." She beat it up. "The line's dead."

Nancy looked way too pale, but then so did Steve and he wasn't shot. Mike crossed the room and gave Nancy her gun back. The weight of it pulled her hand down to the floor. "Always taking my stuff." Her joke fell flat. "I knew it."

"Yeah, I lied. I sneak your savings too. Did it go all the way through?" Mike leaned around and peered at the side of Steve's soaking red palm, which tilted for a split second, just enough to show a ragged meaty edge. Mike felt blank when he should have been upset. "That's an exit wound. What about the entrance wound? Did you even look for it? She's still bleeding."

"Oh..." Steve said, "Shit."

Nancy began patting around at her torn and flapping pantleg with noodle arms. Steve tried to brush her hands out of his way but she fought back, and he fought back, and on they went in a squabble headed for nowhere.

Tommy hadn't stopped rocking his girlfriend yet. "Give me your knife," Mike said.

"Huh?"

"You used a knife to slash Steve's tires. Give me it."

Tommy tilted Carol, stirring her barking back up, patted around in his baseball jacket and underhand-tossed a folded pocket knife in Mike's direction. He then turned Carol onto her back so that her head fell back over his leg, where she began to breathe easier, and trailed his fingers along her throat like he was petting a shy kitten. It was infuriating to watch. Douchebags weren't supposed to be nice to anyone, not even each other. Especially not each other.

Mike unfolded the knife and found Nancy's look of terror annoying. "Do you have any idea how much research I do for my campaigns? I know everything about battlefields. I'm not going to cut you." With the edge of the blade facing out he cut away the leg of Nancy's jeans above the knee, exposing a second little hole on his side of her leg. It was only about an inch away from the exit wound. "Who has a belt?"

Steve was already unbuckling with his free hand.

"Will! WILL!"

"...Yeah?"

"It's safe to come out. You can use my bike to get help, get to a phone and call an ambulance for Nancy."

"No," Nancy said, "Hopper." She shouted, "Go get Hopper! Does anyone know where he lives?"

"Nancy come on," Steve said, "That's way too crazy you've lost like—"

"Shut up." Nancy winced. Steve had begun tightening the belt below her knee while murmuring indecipherable syllables. Her eyes watered and her eyebrows made a huge teepee but she didn't yell. "All this might have to stay a secret. I can tell Hopper about Jonathan and Eleven while he takes me and Carol to the hospital."

"You're not a shitty DM," Mike said. "I take it back."

Nancy jostled limply. "Thanks." Her head rolled against the bookshelf while Steve tried to force a new notch into his belt using only the prong. It wasn't going to work. Mike reached over and, once Steve caught on and got out of his way, poked a hole through the dented spot using the point of the handy new Christmas present Tommy had just given him for keeps. "You too," Nancy added. "You're not a shitty DM too."

Will appeared quaking by the kitchen doorway. "I kn-know where he-he-Hop-Hopper lives," he said. "Me and my mo-mom go there to hang out some-times. I can tell him abou-out Jonathan an-hnd this and and and—"

"Hey. Will." Steve mimed the swing of a baseball bat and marked the impact with a "Hit the road."

"Right." Will almost smiled. "Thanks. Bye." He hopped over Tommy's outstretched legs. The front door slammed hard behind him. Nancy patted the back of Steve's head *good-dog* style.

"Where's Scoop?" called Nicole from far away, vibrating the floor with her voice. "I left my cat down here!" She sounded scared out of her gourd, over a cat? "Where is he? Scoo-oop!"

Mike gargled dry frustration. "So he got out. He got out! Who gives a crap?"

"He's not allowed out! There are wolves around here, and cars! And bears! He'll die!"

"If you don't let him out he'll never live!" Mike folded his knife. The air in the living room snapped silent along with it, slamming a door of its very own on the entire night.

Christmas morning's dawn had begun to crack the white world wide open like a fresh egg full of fire opals. The engine chugged. The steering wheel quivered at unplowed mounds of snow in the road. Oldies monopolized the radio.

—risked your life you bitch you fucking bitch what if this thing oh my God Nancy—

The air hung perfectly crystal-still, cold enough to freeze the nosehairs on the first breath.

Jonathan nudged his car door into its frame without fully closing it and ducked his head low. He avoided the untouched pink snow on the Wheelers' front lawn to crunch along their driveway's tire treads of frozen slush instead. The valley between the side of their garage and its parallel snowdrift was wide enough that he could prance long strides down it to conceal his pointed footprints. Only Nancy would know he had come over, and not until after he had passed on.

He would just leave it there, tucked away behind a wall of snow on the sill so it couldn't be seen from the outside, and if it turned out she didn't want it no one would be put on the spot. He brushed all the snow off the step-up bin and climbed on top.

Nancy's bedroom light was on. If she left it on even for Christmas Eve she had to still be leaving it on every night. The eavestrough

overflowed with ice, the roof was covered in a hard white crust and Jonathan didn't even own a pair of gloves, but in exchange for stinging hands and a sore middle he made it.

His breath patted a golden film onto the windowpane. Nancy slept flat on her back with her hands folded on her chest and the bedding undisturbed. It was as if someone else had made the bed around her and arranged her on display for visitors.

What an idiotic idea that was, to just drop the thing off here and leave. Keeping a stolen gun could get anyone—but especially a girl with as much to lose as Nancy had—in deep, permanent trouble. You didn't drop so much responsibility into a person's lap without asking.

Jonathan shuffled backwards to the edge of the window and turned away while he tapped on it so Nancy wouldn't wake up being stared at, but his eyes dragged themselves back to her before he finished the fourth knock. She smiled, stretched out and squirmed happily, expecting somebody, and then she saw him.

Her covers flapped up and over the bed like the wing of a restless dove revealing a hidden wound. When the window rattled up it wafted a sleepy gust of lavender into the peppermint air. "Hey," she said. Her red plaid nightgown had lacy white trim around the bib and a teddybear embroidered on the front. There was enough room to fit another whole Nancy inside it, a whole person. A whole extra person could slide in there with her. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, of course, I just. I'm. Hey."

Nancy slouched on her cushioned window seat, swept up a patch of snow from the sill into her bare hands and made a snow ball. She shaved away rough edges with her fingertips and smoothed unsightly lumps using the bodyheat in her palms, patiently absorbed in her craft.

Jonathan didn't know how to introduce the thing so he just took it out of his pocket and put it there in the space Nancy didn't know she had cleared for it. "Merry Christmas."

She laughed at him. "Seriously?"

He shrugged and went for broke: the box of bullets jingled merrily down beside it. "Seriously."

"But everything's okay?"

"Don't worry, it's just that I won't be seeing my dad if I don't have to, and there's no point in me having it. —Unless you don't want it. I understand why you wouldn't. That's why I woke you."

Nancy threw her perfectly spherical little snowball at him. It patted to his chest without breaking, plopped onto the roof and rolled away. "You're crazy," she bantered, staring at his mouth, scorching it. Was there something wrong with it? He wet his lips quick. Nancy shivered, looked out at the bluing sky and pulled her arms tight around herself.

"Think about Mom."

"What?"

What had Jonathan just said? He couldn't remember. "Can you remember her voice, what it sounded like?"

Suspicion painted a strawberry blush across Nancy's nose. "Um...?" She squinted at him in humor, forgiving him before he could explain. "Are you still here?"

Jonathan's insides twisted with shame. "Remember all the nice stuff Mom said to you in the bath? To make you stronger?" He was making Nancy uncomfortable. He was embarrassing her. Psycho Byers the schizophrenic creep had just stalked up to Nancy's window uninvited on Christmas morning to chatter jibberish at her while offering her a weird and dangerous and illegal gift.

Nancy cringed and smiled at the same time. Jonathan knew that look, he saw it on all the girls: she was trying to come up with a way to ask him to leave that wouldn't make him violent. "You don't have to, though," she said. "The camera wasn't really a p—"

"—Present. I know." Jonathan was slipping slowly backwards down the roof. It was too slow to see, but he could feel it. "This isn't really a present either. I might have to take it back. Depends what my dad

does if he notices it's missing."

"So..." Nancy's tension dissolved into sweet sympathy. Or was it relief? "You're being practical."

"Yah, practical." The mix tape he had stayed up all night to make was eating its way through his pocket but he didn't have the guts. "Exactly. I thought—Y'know, since you're good with it, if anything else happens..."

Nancy's eyes were bluer than the holes in a tin can held up to the sky. "Do you think something else might happen?"

"—No. No, I just thought that if you had it you wouldn't worry, you know?"

"I can't," she said. The gun lay on its side in her open hands.

"You can't?"

"No, I can't." One side of Nancy's mouth drooped down her chin and pulled back up again. She shook off the faux pas with her lashes fluttering and smiled shyly behind a few fallen locks of hair. "I'm sorry."

Goosebumps seared down Jonathan's back. This wasn't what was supposed to happen. This was the something else that might happen. It was happening right now.

Nancy enclosed the grip of the gun in both hands—backwards, pointing it at herself. "I messed up."

Jonathan's hands froze to the windowsill. "Please just try. For Mom." His stomach rumbled. "I'm so scared. It has to work. I need you to keep trying."

"Murderers," Nancy said. She rammed the full length of the barrel into her eye.

Sitting down to wait was the worst thing Mike could imagine doing, so he searched the house for Eleven. He knew it was dumb but he

couldn't help it. He looked into the shadowy space behind the sofa, he looked out the window where Will was still accelerating to cruising speed, he looked under the kitchen table and he looked every other place where there was no chance she would be.

"Elle," he mumbled into the yellow refrigerator, which offered nothing she would like. How did she find food in the upside down? Mike pinched himself on the arm a few cruel times so he wouldn't end up crying in front of anyone.

He shouldn't have yelled at her. He hated yelling at her. Why did it have to be like this? Why did he have to yell at her as soon as he found her? What if she ran away even further this time? What if he never saw her again?

She couldn't live in the upside down. It was so cold in there, so dark, so gross and dirty. It was *toxic* in the upside down. There had to be a safer place to hide. Was there any sunlight at all? How did she stay happy? How did she get clean and warm?

In her whole life had she ever even taken a bath that was just a normal bath?

Mike wandered down the hall, almost punched that stupid cat clock in its stupid side-to-side eyes, turned back and circled around the living room again.

"Hey Tommy," Steve said. He had tied Nancy's severed pantleg around her calf as a bandage. The denim was all stained dark but it wasn't dripping. "Want some help getting Carol onto the couch?"

"Huh? Uh. No. No, I'm good. You stay with uh, Nancy. I'll do it," and Tommy began to agitate Carol.

All Mike wanted to do was give Eleven a hug.

He speedwalked back to Nicole's bedroom and sat down in the desk chair. "You're not a murderer," he said, cutting his thumbnail along a gouge in the top of the desk nonstop, trying to start a fire. "You're the opposite. You saved us from the Demogorgon. I can still take you to the Snow Ball. I got your letter. I care too. I'm sorry I yelled at you.

I'm not mad at you. I miss you. A lot."

Nothing happened. Mike scrubbed at his eyes, left the bedroom, kicked a bunch of fallen books out of his way and sat down beside his floppy sister, then leaned his head on her shoulder and stopped caring what he did in front of anyone. She tousled his hair while quietly telling Steve a lot of things that Mike already knew.

What if he hadn't decided to stay at the house?

What if Eleven *was* a murderer?

All of a sudden the floor vibrated again, as much as it had done from Nicole's voice, and then a lot more. A short earthquake faded into splintering. The splintering crashed. Mike looked to Nancy as if she knew anything but she and Steve were staring at each other with that same dumb look they had on their faces when the phone rang.

Nancy grabbed the front of Steve's shirt in her fist, twisted it and pulled while her other hand pawed at the bookshelf. She was trying to get up? She was trying to get up and walk on a shot leg? Did she have gunpowder in her brain? She gasped and cried out. Steve scrambled at her. They fell back down together.

Nicole stamped up the basement stairs and came into the living room with her mouth hanging open. She closed it and opened it and closed it again. Then she burst into tears.

Steve pulled Nancy's hand off his shirt so easily it could have been a moth. He kissed her forehead. "Stay here."

13. thirteen

13.

The soft spot below Jonathan's adam's apple, at the base of the throat, where the clavicles met each other: that was where the monster wanted to come out. He could tell because that was where it maintained a polite and persistent tapping. He tried humming Brahm's Lullaby to help Elle concentrate but every note came out wrong. The glue in his mouth made him sound like a swamp creature.

"Mike," Elle burbled, snotty. "Mike."

Her struggle swung from enveloping aches to targeted pains and back again without rhythm, offering no periods of relief, no inner sunshine for Jonathan to anticipate. The flashlight moon, nested in its circles of gold, shined streaks along his eyes.

"Monster," Elle whispered. Her pseudo-fist shoved him violently, swaying the flashlight moon from side to side across the sky, yanking cemented chunks of his hair from a puddle of glue on the floor.

Stop it. He was about to choke on a ball of crumpled sticky-tape. Leave me alone. I quit.

"Murderers," said Elle's little bell. The creature answered, flexing, shaking, plucking at the place where Jonathan would gag if only he could remember how to do it. His fingers and toes were numb from cold, as if he lay prone in a pile of snow, or underground, numb because the worms were eating the littlest parts first. Fingers, toes. Ears. Nose. Eating away at him like frostbite.

The snow, that was it. That had to be it: after saying goodbye to Nancy he had slipped and fallen off the Wheelers' icy garage roof and hit his head on the step-up bin, and now he lay in his own footprints,

hidden between the snowdrift and the wall, just this side of knocked out. Luckily Nancy had already closed the window so she hadn't heard him fall. That would have been awkward.

As soon as he fully came-to he could grab a handful of snow to nurse the swelling, then drive home, sneak back into his bed like nothing had happened at all and wait for Will to come drag him out of it again, marking the official start of Christmas morning. By the time he got to work on breakfast he would forget all about his new friend Elle and the monsters eating him alive from the inside, and next month Nancy would be back in the caf again, safe and whole like always, stealing his carrot sticks one by one while he scanned his mangled excuse for history notes and pretended not to notice.

And he would definitely, definitely take the gun back and either bury it in the woods or drop it off at Lonnie's. Lesson learned, thank you dreamland.

"Mike." Elle punched him again. It didn't feel like help. It felt like he deserved it.

Jonathan's eyes warmed. The flashlight moon blurred, multiplied, honeycombed. He couldn't bluff his way through this one either.

I quit this. Go away. A warm hand cradled his heart, consoling it, and then bit down and shook it like a dog with a new toy. *No, forget it. Don't bother.* He hated carrot sticks. *Fuck you.* He packed them every day. *This isn't happening.*

"Mike. I'm sorry too."

The rattling switched off. It was the release of a tether, freeing Jonathan to float up into space in airy silence, but instead the floor changed shape, curving under his weight, sliding him down into a groove.

The dark shadow that was Elle wiped its nose in triumph. "I did it." Her velcro sleeve ripped apart once more, illustrating her point: "It's unstuck." The moon haloed her head off-centre, outshining her face and rendering her expressionless, thumblike.

A carnivorous breath exhaled from the dip below. Jonathan patted at the floor until he found her—a flap of fabric, a fleecy flannel hem hanging from under her coat—and held on with all the might of a rat in a storm drain. "But it's not out," he rasped, "Don't. I can't go back yet. Don't."

"I'm not. It's going." Stifled by an endless yawn, Elle sounded too tired to care what happened at all. But how would she feel after a snack and a nap? How could she stand living alone in this place another day?

Jonathan dipped ass-first through the floorboards and into a widening, slobbering mouth. A thin patch in the fleece he was holding tore open. He hooked it. "Come too. See Mike. See Mom."

"Can't go back."

A strobing blade of light beamed up from below. "We'll take care of you."

In a snap Elle was bawling. "Bad. Secret." She grabbed at Jonathan's hand in a confused fit, holding it tight while trying to extricate it from the rip in her clothing at the same time. "Can't. Hiding."

"Then I can't either," but he wanted to. He was so close. Jonathan wanted to go home more than anything he could ever want, even if it meant infecting a hundred nurses, killing every one of them and leaving Elle alone in this place to rot forever. The maw's moldy tongue gave way then, winning, snickering at him, celebrating, *liar*.

"Goodbye Jonathan," said Elle.

"Wear your mask," he replied.

His handhold tore off. His knees bumped his forehead. The webbed gullet swallowed him down into a subtle plume of lemon soap and ammonia—this was it, the falling part of the dream, the part that woke you up—and spat him out into blinding, flashing light. For a long second it seemed he would not land.

His bed broke his fall, then snapped and collapsed under his weight in a way that was nothing like a bed at all. The pink insulation lining

the unfinished ceiling hung down in rotten cotton candy tufts, living tufts, already curling in upon themselves and knitting back together over the hole. The basement's hanging bulb swung around, pitching the room back and forth in a blurry, turbulent, sickening sea. A mermaid moaned a wail of rising urgency among the waves, then stamped up the stairs.

Long spidery legs ticked up toward the swallowpoint in Jonathan's throat and started tapping again, as if to complain, so delicately, *I wanted to say Hi to that girl*. He lay limp and bruised against the slanted tabletop, crusty eyed, gluey mouthed, seated in clean laundry. Maybe if he didn't move, the thing wouldn't either. Maybe he could trick it by playing dead. Maybe he wasn't totally playing.

A body careened down the stairs, taking half the flight in three steps and longjumping the rest of the way to the floor. "No way, come on, this is just stupid." Steve didn't sound like Steve. "This is way too much." He sounded like he was about to—"No, no, no, too much. Too much." He dragged in a tight breath. "No way. Please, no way."

Not him. Please, not him. Jonathan rolled away, off the table and into a heap on the floor. *Anyone but him.*

"OhthankGod," and Steve's hushed frenzy was a deafening foot away: "Hey hey hey what's your deal? What do I do what do I do?" Rather than wait for an answer he pulled Jonathan onto his back, "Is that it? Oh shit that's it isn't it?" and yanked at his t-shirt collar with both hands, trying to rip it like a wrestler. "It's moving in there Jesus fuck I can see it moving hold on I can—"

"Off." Jonathan had feathers for fists. Steve didn't even seem to notice them.

I'd like to meet him, the monster groped and tapped. *This minute. Second. Tick tick.*

"I can see it it's right there oh shit shit shit shit *shitshit whadoIdo*—"

"Off." Steve was too slippery to grab—and sticky, and deeply, insidiously all wrong. "Off, off off!"

Steve finally let go.

His hands were covered in drying blood.

And so were Jonathan's: blood in his hangnails, blood in his fingerprints, blood smearing the parallel between headline and heartline, blood pouring stoically down Nancy's cheek from the black hole that had once held her eye.

Jonathan's gag reflex woke up so forcefully it startled Steve a yard backwards.

He rolled over and retched into the laundry, needing this thing out of him yesterday, but he couldn't do it. Some part of himself that he couldn't control, some terrified and dumb prehistoric part, kept swallowing it down as if not seeing it meant it didn't exist, and all he could do was drool like he did back in the road, back at the start of this all over again. "Nancy," he sputtered in a spark of reason, unafraid of the truth because she couldn't be dead—Steve wouldn't be down here, he'd be catatonic if Nancy was dead.

"She's fine. Carol kind of accidentally shot her in the leg but it's not that bad, it's like a graze, like a big scratch and that's it. She's totally fine." Steve smoothed his hand out over an invisible curve. "Like completely totally fine, like awesome."

Jonathan knew a bluff when he heard one, especially one so amateur. He slashed Steve straight across the face with his slitted don't-fuck-with-me eyes between lurches.

"Okay, not totally fine but we patched her up and help is coming. Her brother's with her and yours is off getting help. Hey." Steve's hand grazed his shoulder, hesitated in revulsion and then changed its mind, gripping tight through slime and stink and all. "Hey. Can we worry about you now? Can we do something about this?"

"Is he there?"

The sound or her voice set off a flare, granting Jonathan a pause in which to spit, to cough, to grindingly catch his breath, and to discover that he might have developed a case of pneumonia along

with everything else.

"Is that him? It's him, right? He's there?"

"Is he alone?"

Sorry Mike, I tried.

"Yeah, he's here! Just him!"

"Is he okay?" called Nancy.

"He will be, I mean yeah. Give us a few minutes."

Jonathan used a pair of panties to wipe his mouth because—well, hey. Why not? For all he knew it was the closest he would ever get.

Two sharp thumps, a girly grunt and "I'm coming down!"

No.

Jonathan could hardly shake his head but Steve read him anyway: "No! Nancy you have to stay up there. You can't do stairs and you can't—you can't see this. Trust me. Please just trust me. I know you hate doing that but trust me anyway, this one time. Five minutes."

"I can help! Whatever's wrong I can—" *Thump.* A sharp cry matured into a sob of frustration.

"STOP HURTING YOURSELF, STUPID!"

"Then why don't you *help me walk*, you—"

"No! NO! Five minutes!"

A leg thrust up higher in pursuit of their panic, reaching so high up that Jonathan couldn't swallow it down again—so high up he couldn't breathe anymore.

He needed to scream but he couldn't breathe anymore.

The prehistoric part of him declared war on it, reached into his mouth, clawed at his throat, but then Steve was tackling him, pinning

his arms to his sides and bashing his head on the floor like some meatheaded football field numbskull about to hock a loog and spit, some sniggering posturing piece of star-athlete shit who needed his face smashed in right fu—

"—isten! Listen to me, listen! HEY! I don't want to hit you. I really, really don't but you've gotta stop grabbing at it, you maniac. Are you listening? If we crush these things it's just like a chem exam except instead of failing you die at the end, you get me? You in there? You unders—"

"WHAT?" Thud. Steve cursed under his breath. "NO! Michael let go of me! Let go let go let GO you little douchebag frogthing asshole jerkface..."

Tick. Tick tick. Tick tick tick ti

Steve cranked his volume down, "You hear that? Yeah? You do? See, she's fine, she's better than fine, she's dynamite. The sooner you slow down the sooner this is done and the sooner you can go up there without anybody going nuts and without you checking out early in front of her and then you can see her. That's what you want, right? —Oh you think you can shit me right now? I am not an idiot and it doesn't matter. Now chill." Steve shook him. "The hell. Out. Okay? You'll be the first one all night."

The hanging lightbulb whined inaudibly, its image a white hot sawblade between Jonathan's ears. He couldn't move, the way his hands couldn't move when he swaddled them in his pockets. Steve was staring but he wasn't angry, wasn't sizing him up or putting him down. He wasn't laughing at him either, not that he ever really had. He was just worried.

One little breath squeaked in.

"Okay?"

Alright, okay. As long as Jonathan didn't pull too hard and suck this thing into his lungs it might be enough for a while. He tried to nod. He tried to slow down. Air moved thinly between his outside and his inside. Steve let him go, so he got to his knees, buried his hands

through the bed of clothes to palm the cool cement floor, and focused on threading his lifeline through a pinhole.

"Then would you just—could you just—could you at least—" Nancy hitched and sobbed from hurting herself. Why'd she have to go and hurt herself like that? "Tell me what's happening!"

ticktickticktick

"You were right the whole time, we are fixing it, and according to the rules I just made up we still have four minutes. We're busy. That's good news, means there's something to do." Steve wrenched a broken aluminum leg off the collapsed table and wielded it memorably. His voice dropped nearly to nothing. "Spit it out and I'll do my thing. You're fine, it's almost done."

The prehistoric part began to cooperate. It migrated to Jonathan's abdomen, tried to break his back by puking and failed miserably, so it tried again, and again, and again. His toes were trying to puke, his ears were trying to puke, his balls were trying to puke; forget his guts, this thing was going to take his soul along with it on the way out.

A cheeky cartoon girl in a pink hat smiled up through smears of unmentionable crud. Strawberry Shortcake. Jonathan had wiped his mouth using Strawberry Shortcake underpants.

"Steve?" shrilled Nancy.

"Shut up for two minutes!" Steve clamped on to Jonathan's arm and spoke right into his ear, "Hey, why don't you try going somewhere else for a while? Go to a concert or into a porno or back to kindergarten, you know? I'm telling you, take off. Give your instincts some room. I know what I'm talking about, I'm good at running away. And you—you just got hired full time shooting Playboy centerfolds and slave Leia's miss January so get the hell outta here before some dickhead takes your place."

The pinhole closed and didn't reopen. Jonathan's vision sparkled. This was it. Starry shit-smeared Strawberry Shortcake underpants, and then nothing. Goodbye, for keeps, forever.

Fresh pain flared in his arm. Steve was going to leave bruises on a dead body. He was framing himself. That wasn't right. "Or how bout Becky Nelson? You know bigtitty Becky, everybody knows her, she wouldn't wear a bra 'til the ninth grade. I have it on personal authority that her parents? Had to ground her for six weeks to make it happen and you can keep that to yourself 'cause she'll know where you heard it. Bigtitty brunette Becky Nelson, miss February spread out under the umbrella lights doing whatever you tell her to for hours because all she wants is your attention, and when you get her alone at the end of the shoot the tits are like— like— like big silk sacks of marshmallow with Hershey Kisses on top but way damn better than that, believe me. —How about it? —Yeah? —Yes! Hey Nancy! We got it, he's good!"

Upstairs there was a little bump, and a vocal sigh.

It was over.

Jonathan could hardly remember the final heave that must have been (sour jello brillo pad), but it was over, it was out, and it was retarded.

It lay in a puddle by a sock. The skin was a black-veined, pasty grey. Three long, stubbled legs, strung with mucous—two on one side and one on the other—grasped impotently at the air from their anchorpoints in arbitrarily arranged segments of an undulating body smaller than a baseball. It couldn't walk. It had no face. It made no sense at all: here on the body was a patch of stubbly barbs, there and there and there on the body were clusters of popped bubblewrap. One of the bubblewrap blisters remained intact. Inside its milky translucent shell a stunted black worm writhed, an angrily convulsing prisoner.

"Congratulations," said Steve, lip curled, "It's a..."

This wasn't a living thing, it was a chimera of disparate bodyparts, a product of mixed seeds sprouting from the clump in which they had just happened to congeal. It had to be some fluke, some accident, the fruit of a fertilization process cut short.

"...bomination?"

Jonathan spat a wad of red foam on it. "Yeah." He had fluid in his lungs but, beyond hoarse, he was afraid to cough. The bomination had cut him a hundred tiny times on the way out and coated the roof of his mouth in copper.

Steve's weapon tapped the floor, disappointed. "Do I bother?" He moved to pass the torch. "Your turn?"

Jonathan sat frozen in morbid fascination, in this sick subterranean mess of filth, insanity and the girl next door's clothes. Each hair of the stubble covering the legs ended with a little hook. Some of the hooks had taken crumbs of his insides with them. "Get it away from me." It responded by waving at him with a leg like a beckoning witch finger. "Get it away."

Steve got up and used his stick as a golf club to putt the bomination across the floor until it hit the stack of boxes lining the wall. He raised his weapon in both hands, readying to thrust it down, a sword into a stone—

"Wait," the vowels were made of splinters, "Don't kill it."

Steve turned around. "What, you wanna name it?"

No, dumbass. "The noise. They—"

"Scream! Right. I getcha." Steve batted and kicked most of the clothes on top of it, then grabbed the table and propped it up against the pile as a blockade. "Good?"

"Good." A smothering heatwave descended the moment Jonathan freed his mind of monsters. Burning up, he struggled to get out of his top layers, twisting them into a straitjacket, then willed himself out of the knot before Steve had a chance to help him any more.

Nancy had begun to chant, strained yet unfeeling, "...come up here, come up here, come up here, come *up* here," and with it came a soft and steady beat, like someone rocking, or hitting a wall with no strength, for no good reason.

She was hurting a lot. Jonathan had a lot to do with it. "I don't know if I can," he confided in Strawberry Shortcake. He hoped Elle still had

some food with her, that she might put her mask on and try sleeping in Nicole's clean bed for a while.

"Not looking like that you can't." A hand appeared, less bloody than last time. "Can you stand?"

"Come up. Just *come up*."

"Alright, okay," but instead of taking the hand, Jonathan knocked it away. He didn't know or care why, only that he felt like it, and when it reappeared he did it again. The third time it was too strong to get rid of so he just sat there waiting for it to hit him back.

"Don't be an asshole," Steve said. "There's a girl who needs to see you and she can't see you like this. Come on, let's go soak your head."

"I don't care what he looks like, you dummy," Nancy groused down dimly.

"Glad to hear it. You're not looking at him."

Jonathan had rocks in his knees and stripes bruised across his back. Steve heaved him up and shambled him along to the big laundry tub using a lot more than just a hand. The room rotated under Jonathan's feet as they went, holding him to the centre of a shrinking universe.

He collided with the tub, grabbed on to the plastic lip, and in that moment what could have been a trick of perspective revealed itself as absolutely real: all of this, everything, was ending. It would keep on ending until it was over. Nothing could be simpler. It was a surprisingly easy pill to swallow.

Steve turned on the tap. It pummeled an earthquake into the basin.

Jonathan scooped palmful after palmful of water into his mouth without choosing to and without feeling thirsty, and stopped only because he needed to hold himself upright. Somehow Steve understood this: he delivered a puddle in his cupped, clean hands. Jonathan drank from it, heaved, batted Steve aside and threw it all up again. Nothing but pink. No more monster parts and no more drinking for now. Fair bargain. "Thanks anyway," he said.

"No problem."

The deep pneumonia cough took over and constricted, rubbing salt into a million microcuts, dropping speckled yellow glue into the drain. Something like this was going to happen to everybody. Elle first, probably, but later even Steve, herculean Steve the rehabilitated dickhead rubbing his back as if it was going to help anything. But it did, eventually. It did help. "I did this, it's my fault. I knew I was sick and I didn't tell anybody."

A sharp shrug. "Oh well."

"My mom..."

"Oh *well*. Shit happens." Steve handed him a bundle of white cloth bearing delicate patterns of embroidery and pearls: abraisives for scrubbing.

Rattling, Jonathan wedged the lip of the basin under his arms for support, wrung the cloth in the stream and waited for the water to run warm over his hands. When it finally did he could have pissed himself, and when he pressed the heat to his face it took away a rough imprint of an undead Halloween mask, a mess of monster blood and tunnel crud. "This isn't going away," he said.

"What, you mean you?—I mean as in you being sick?—or you mean... stuff? The freaky business?"

"I mean everything you hope I don't." Jonathan wrung and wiped, wrung and wiped, until black and brown became beige, then white. Silently he laughed a turtle's bitterness at the drain, slow and smug. "This 'business' isn't going to get better. We're fucked."

"Yeah, I had a feeling," Steve said, blessedly casual. "Been avoiding it, but..." He splashed few artless handfuls of hot water over Jonathan's head. "Who wouldn't, am I right?"

Cold raw egg dribbled down to the the nape of Jonathan's neck. A laundry soap bottle landed in the basin with the lid off. He moved to help but Steve just picked his wrist up in a pincer grip and put it aside. "Get the rest of you, fix your face," Steve said, needling gluey

wads of extradimensional intestinal bubblegum from Jonathan's hair. "Ugh, God you stink. What is this?"

Slowly the pulling softened to a utilitarian, club-fingered scratching that reminded Jonathan of his dad. Not his real dad, but the dad he thought he had when he was six, before he was supposed to be anything but silly and sandboxy, scraped-kneed and barefoot.

Full alert.

They were standing in floodwater. It was too out of phase to see, but he could feel it. How high up did it reach? Shins, knees? Over the rim of the basin? It was dripping into his ears, blending faucet sounds and scratching sounds into an isolating *wom wom wom wom*. Any second, he could switch back to the other side again and drown. For all he knew he was still dreaming, drowning in his sleep.

Wait, no, Steve would tell him if something was wrong. Steve would stop washing him and tell him, definitely—which would suck, because this was really nice. He might go get a haircut tomorrow just for this part. The apocalypse could wait.

Plop. Jonathan woke up. A black blob swirled down the drain. "Woah, we can't..."

"Leave it." Steve picked at his hair, distant, occupied. "They've gotta be fuckin' everywhere by now so just let it be. I've heard they bite but apparently these ones aren't hungry." *Plop, plop.* "If it's not gonna get better then screw it. We're not superheroes, we're not soldiers." *Plop.* Jonathan was a kid with head lice. He was a chimpanzee, a groomee in a tree. "We're seventeen, and this?" *Ploploplop.* "Is complete horseshit."

14. fourteen

14.

Nancy sat crumpled up against the wall in the narrow hallway. She felt like she had fallen down a shadowy crack, or into an industrial trash compactor in a big space station in some movie or other.

Inarticulate murmurs haunted the house: Mike mumbled to 'himself' in Nicole's room, Tommy and Nicole took monosyllabic turns across a canyon of silence in the living room, and Steve and Jonathan hummed calming music downstairs. They weren't singing, but they were beautiful, so Nancy listened, unable to grasp the words through the din of rushing water, alone.

The toes at the end of her bad leg had gone numb and she didn't know exactly why, but she had three theories. One, the intensity of the pain was blocking the signal. Two, the tourniquet belt was so tight it was blocking the signal. Three, there was no signal to block in the first place because the nerves were permanently damaged. Four, a combination of all of the above. Four theories.

But it didn't matter. Jonathan was safe, and Nancy was too short for dance anyway. She played with the golden slippers on her necklace—the charm that had drawn admiring touches from all five girls in the studio after her twelfth birthday—for a long, miserably conflicted while. She didn't deserve this and it hadn't even helped anything, but it had to be worth it. She would make herself believe it was worth it. She would make believe until it was true if she had to.

Footsteps scuffed the carpet behind her. She twitched in acknowledgement. The footsteps slid closer, the stocking feet dragging sparks, the breaths short and strained.

Carol sat down facing Nancy and stared at her leg.

She wasn't chewing gum. Her unblinking eyes bulged and her makeup was a smudged mess, dressing her up as a sickly, permanently terrified—preferably roadkilled—raccoon. She raised her fingertip and put it on the wall beside herself to draw a letter: *I*, and finally made eye contact.

Nancy raised surly eyebrows: *Go on*.

Carol turned back to her canvas and wrote in invisible ink, *I-M-A-B-I-T-C-H*.

"Yeah," Nancy said. "You are."

Carol got up, placed a wrapped stick of gum the floor beside Nancy's ivory hand, and left.

Nicole brought three white pills and a glass of water. She placed these things on the floor beside the stick of gum, and left.

Nancy almost asked them to come back. That was how badly she didn't want to be alone.

She put the stick of gum and one of the pills into the pocket over her heart. According to the calculations of her aching and underfed brain, Barb's glasses would purify the other things. The glasses were a lot bigger and more important, so it stood to reason.

The two remaining pills gazed up at her from above a crease in her palm, making a pensive cookie-monster face. Drugstore painkillers couldn't do squat about her leg, she knew that, but maybe her leg didn't know that. She choked them down one at a time. The water tasted like metal but she sipped at it anyway, holding it in both hands the way she held hot cocoa, and cast her focus out to fish for the haunted house's softest murmur.

A bump gonged up the pipes and echoed through the skeleton of the home: someone had turned off the faucet in the basement.

"I think I'm okay. ... Yah, sure, we can go."

Nancy put her glass of water aside.

A hint of the poison smell came up the stairs first, coating the moment in varnish, preparing to set it into long-term memory. Nancy's future flashed before her eyes: she would revisit this, puff breath on it, shine it, lick at its lustre and happily cut her tongue on it until she was dead or senile. Repeated recollection would buff away the crippling pain, the helplessness and the hysteria, but she would remember this perfectly. This moment. Right now.

Four feet creaked up the stairs, two sneaking, two plodding, while one voice offered a private pep talk, *"One foot next foot, cadet. Pick 'em up and put 'em down. There you go. You're good, you're great— you got this, you're golden."* A white shoe toed the basement door all the way open. Steve waggled his eyebrows, *Tadaa*, and tilted his head at his treasure. "If I pay for its shots can we keep it?"

Jonathan drooped from an elbow slung over Steve's neck, a bundle of sticks and rags, thirty pounds lost in three hours. The lines under his puffy eyes had piled upon one another, his ordeal cut into him as deeply as the thumbnail crescents worried down a leather camera strap in an attached garage a hundred years ago, and yet somehow, magically, he was smiling.

"Hey," he said.

Nancy threw herself out of her body and kissed him.

Reality was less romantic: she had hardly moved before the pain howled up her leg to knock her down again. Jonathan leapt out to catch her but fell, Steve swore, Jonathan bowed over her but didn't land on her because Steve had him by his belt and a handful of his t-shirt, and everyone froze for a moment in an impromptu round of Twister.

Pulled backwards, Jonathan hit the wall, slid down it and sat beside her. His boots had been mucked beyond redemption, stonewashed jeans smeared black to the knees, baggy t-shirt warped and sweat-ringed, hair in needles, nostrils flaring, lips white, smile gone. "Mostly okay?" he said. The angry concern lines wrinkling his forehead burned the back of Nancy's hand.

"I didn't say 'mostly okay'—"

"This what mostly okay looks like to you?" His cheeks were hot too, both of them, and his forearms, clammy and pasty and not better yet, not at all.

"—I said we patched her up." Steve was about to take a nap on his feet. "Look, see?" He flung an arm out toward Nancy and the counter-force threw him back against the opposite wall with his eyes already closed. The impact reverberated right through him. "Patches."

Jonathan huffed, coughed a fit and, cuddling up to the embossed wallpaper, began to shiver.

Nancy picked up her water. "You're right, though. I am. I'm mostly okay." The next part was an order: "Just like you." She nudged the glass against his hand but he shook his head in distaste, so she fetched the stick of gum and the pill from her pocket instead, waited for his hand to open up and dropped them into it.

Jonathan rolled the pill in the pinch of his forefinger and thumb, shuddered, and lost it in the forest of carpet fibres. Rather than chase after it he unwrapped the stick of gum, fumbling foil very slowly—but when he got a taste he chewed eagerly enough to disintegrate it.

Nancy hovered her hand near him in wait of a job to do, a crack to mend. He chomped and shivered for a while, then took hold of one of her fingertips and puzzled over it so intensely that she wondered if the human spirit had all along been housed not in some hidden corner of the brain or the heart, but specifically in the first knuckle of the ring finger, and Jonathan Byers was the only person in the world who could see it.

"I'm sorry," he wisped.

The apology hardened to an unjust needlepoint in Nancy's throat. "You didn't do anything wrong," she said.

"Yeah, sure."

She grappled for the voice she had used on the phone. "What do you need?"

Jonathan solidified on his shivering. His solemn eyes rolled up to look at her, all pupils, two bits of coal in a melting snowman. "I'd like a blanket."

"Hey could—"

"And I'd like a damn *adult*." Steve glared down the hall at the door, one knee locked and the other bouncing. "Time for me to take a walk, see who I can find."

He stood a mile high. Nancy began, "Don't," but the way he looked at her—a shellshock she hadn't seen in weeks—stoppered the rest up tight. *Please don't leave us.*

Steve nodded almost imperceptibly. His blankness bittered. "Hey *Mike*. You left your sister sitting here all alone with a hole in her? What gives?"

"She told me to!"

"Why don't you go take a walk?"

"But Eleven's here."

"She can't hear you right now," Jonathan called, straining to project his voice and failing. "She's tired. Can I have a blanket?"

Mike came out of Nicole's bedroom and drew a snarl from Steve by stepping on his foot. He threw Will's bundled blanket over Nancy and onto Jonathan's drawn-in legs. "Tell me everything."

Nancy tugged on Mike's pantleg. "Not now."

Mike didn't budge—physically. "Then tell me *something*."

Jonathan pulled the blanket around his neck, turning himself into a severed head at precarious rest on the top of a hill, an image made more grisly as he lolled forward to think. "She says she's sorry too."

Mike fought with himself adorably. Nancy wanted to tell him it was okay to smile, really it was, as wide as he wanted to and none of the big kids would make fun of him for liking a girl, just as they hadn't

made fun of him for crying over one.

"I'll go," Mike said. "The sooner Will knows you're okay the better. They're probably almost here." When he turned away Steve hit him meaningfully in the back, shoving him into a stumble. "Yeah whatever, we're even now." He held up a middle finger behind his back on his way out the door.

"You sent Will out alone?"

"Sure. We did him a solid last time. Now it's his turn."

Jonathan stared up at Steve in silent fury. Nancy held her breath.

"What? He's not some little kid," Steve said. "He can take care of himself."

Jonathan's fury remained silent. Nancy touched the cool surface of her drinking water and dripped a few drops onto the back of his hand to test whether it would steam. It didn't, but it did extinguish the fury: he squinted, dipped into the glass himself and flicked a spray at her.

Before Nancy could get her revenge Steve took Jonathan by a leg and an arm and, less carefully than he should have, pulled him away a foot across the carpet. Then he took the glass, drained it in two loud gulps and sat down, wedging himself assertively between them.
"...And that's the end of that chapter."

"I thought you said it doesn't matter," Jonathan grumbled.

"You thought I said *what* doesn't matter? Exactly?"

Jonathan didn't answer.

A groaning lion's yawn filled the hallway's quiet cavern. Along with it came a downright cliche movie-theatre reach, pulling Nancy in tight to hold her in protective custody. She peeked out past the pullover collar, now popped, and found that the reach had been two-armed: Steve's other forearm dangled from Jonathan's far shoulder, his hand hanging at just the right angle to easily swing up and swat him if he wanted to.

The yawn was contagious. Jonathan caught it first, then Nancy yawned what felt like three yawns in one, and then some more, a whole chain of addictive yawns, each lit by the tail end of the last. Her leg still stabbed her startlingly at random but she cared a lot less all of a sudden. She trilled her fingertips on Steve's tummy. It twitched at her, so she did it a bit more for fun. He squished her in retaliation. "Hey Nicole," she called, her voice too quiet and too high pitched, "What were those pills you gave me?"

"They help me sleep through my migraines." Nicole's voice flowed as softly as Nancy's. "I don't know what they're called. My dad gets them under the table from somebody somewhere. Some guy at work I think."

"Shit," Nancy said, but she didn't really mean it.

"Are you allergic to anything?" whispered Jonathan.

"No, no. I'm fine." Very fine. Giddy. Relieved. A lavender twilight rolled into the spaces between Nancy's twinkling neurons. *Synapse, dendrite, soma. Axon. Myelin sheath. Terminal brachia—no, terminal branch. Frontal, parietal, occipital, tempor—*

"Could somebody please tell me what the hell happened here?"

Nancy strained her eyes. Tommy had leaned off the end of the sofa to look down the hallway, grey in the face, gravel in the voice. She couldn't make out his freckles anymore.

"Later." Steve was never so stern with anyone else. "Go see to yours and leave me to mine, Shitforbrains."

Tommy threw something at them, a little stick, a cigarette. Steve picked it up from where it landed by Nancy's hip and tucked it behind his ear. Tommy slid away.

Nancy did some sliding of her own, all the way down Steve's front until she lay in his lap, while his fingertips drew endless, mindless pictures on her back. She crept her vacant hand across his thighs to the other side, certain there was some role she should be playing right now but way too drained to think up a bunch of white lies to

live by. All she had was herself, selfish Nancy Wheeler who did what she wanted and answered for nothing. Today was special. She had taken a bullet for someone today and she was on drugs. She could do whatever she wanted to do and she could be whoever the hell she liked.

When she found Jonathan's hand she pulled it up onto Steve's knee, covered it with hers and folded her fingers under the palm in clear view so Jonathan wouldn't be the only one not doing anything about it, and waited. Nobody did anything about it, except that their fingers wove together—he still had a fever—and Steve's deep, resigned sigh nudged against the back of her head.

Jonathan twitched his swollen fingers. It felt involuntary, unconscious. "You gave me a nightmare." He wasn't really talking so much as adding little sounds to the ends of silent words. "It saved my life."

Nancy had to concentrate to make her mouth work. Thinking aloud like normal wasn't enough. "Who did?"

"You guys, when you got hurt. When—" he coughed, gripped hard, relaxed. "When Steve got upset. I'll explain later. If I feel like it."

Steve sighed, "Freak." The exasperation in it was *so fake*. "Don't forget Becky. She helped too."

"She did." There was shaking, and the clicking of tired laughter. An inside joke about a girl, already? *That girl?* "I think everybody did."

Nancy rolled the sequence of events down her mental hill again, a tiny fifteen-minute reel: Carol shot her, Eleven poltergeisted Carol, Mike shouted at Eleven until she let Carol go, Mike and Steve became field medics, Mike went into the bedroom and mumbled something nice at Eleven; then the thing inside Jonathan let him drop through the basement ceiling, surely somehow with Eleven's help, and Steve helped him... ick. And now a nightmare had something to with it?

A piece was missing, a big piece. No matter how Nancy twisted the existing pieces and slid them around—she had done a lot of rearranging while she waited—she couldn't find the answer. But the

failing wasn't hers. The missing piece was more than big, it was central. "You don't feel like explaining now?"

"No. I might by next lunchtime—in the caf." Jonathan's plea for peace came through his thumb, tenderly petting the side of her hand right out in the open. "I have to think."

In the caf.

There was more than friendship to this intangible trifecta, more than dating, more than family. There was more to it than anything Nancy had ever felt for other people.

What had they all been doing the last month, sitting in silence to orbit every noontime together, letting the baggage be whatever it happened to be on whatever given day? What was the point? All the bad dreams, the flashbacks, the unanswerable questions had evaporated each silent hour but still hovered there above the cafeteria tabletop, a blackening stormcloud ominously promising to cleanse and quench. It hadn't quite opened up, not yet.

Whatever this was, Nancy didn't want to talk about it. She hoped they could keep not talking about it. Putting a whole idea into words meant separating it into pieces, conventional pieces, like reducing a person down to a brain and dividing it into lobes, and she definitely didn't want that. Sometimes good ideas didn't fit into words; sometimes, you had to risk throwing away part of an idea if you wanted to talk about it, if you wanted to make it fit into convention.

Screw convention. It was a lot better this way, the quiet way. It meant not having to throw anything away.

Every rule did have its exception, though. They didn't have to tell each other *everything*, but—"Nomrsecrets," she slurred. "If a'ything cou'be wrong with any one of us we tell the 'ther two."

"Hm," Steve said, and finally stopped drawing pictures on her back.

"K," Jonathan said. His head had fallen to rest somewhere just above hers, and from there the puffs of his breath flowed down and settled hotly over her face in curtains of poison stink, barely hinting at

bubblegum—but it wasn't so bad. The poison place didn't smell like losing someone anymore. It smelled like getting someone back.

Comraderie, that was it. Nancy nuzzled at the denim under her cheek. Comraderie and crushing.

She hit-hit-hitched the deep breath of a child tired out from a long tantrum.

It was time to melt.

15. fifteen

15.

A little patch of drool had formed under Nancy's cheek. Jonathan figured he was drooling as much as she was, but if Steve noticed them he didn't care: he had been talking for a while now, absorbed in his retellings of the recent past. Jonathan grunted occasionally to corroborate a *y'know?* or a *right*, and felt weirdly comfortable. There wasn't really anything to this, it was just someone bigger than him to lean on so he didn't fall over, and it was better than being alone.

"I didn't believe her," Steve was saying. "She pretty much knew what happened to you when she showed up at my place but it took me 'til the phone call." That sounded like a confession, worth more than a grunt.

"You tried to stop her?"

"What? No. No way, of course not." Steve bumped his head back on the wall. "As if I could."

"Then it's fine. Forget it." Muscle by joint, Jonathan worked his weight off Steve's side and onto his own propping arm. His cheek cooled in the air. Yup, drooling. He pulled Will's bedspread tighter around himself.

"You okay?" said Steve. "You're whiter than birdshit."

Jonathan shrugged. He had no idea.

He hadn't gotten to watch Nancy sleep before—that one night last month, she had been the one theorizing while he was the one sleeping through it. And now, pestered by a sense of dread not quite strong enough to edge him into denial, he had to strike down all of her hard work.

The monster never smelled blood. It smelled fear. The whole place smells fear.

He could hardly think the truth to himself it was so crazy, but even the old deer proved it. Found acres from the road, that deer must have been laying there bleeding for ages. The monster hadn't come until he and Nancy showed up to frighten it—and themselves. Jonathan wasn't ten anymore, but right then he felt like he was.

Nancy's leg looked like a horror show. The dark denim excuse for a bandage was soaked black. Brown smears climbed up over her knee and a rusty crust flowed down her ankle and into a bloodsoaked sock. More blood had drawn a dark circle in the carpet. And she was totally oblivious.

We thought it sensed blood because blood is scary. It hunted at night because the dark is scary. It came for my family because we scare so easy. Keep your lights on.

How could Jonathan tell her that? How could he tell *anybody* that? If trying to be afraid made it impossible, trying not to be afraid made it inevitable. He knew it with a sureness that cemented him to the floor, a sureness as fixed as gravity.

Nancy would never sleep again if he told her. She would scare herself so badly trying to be brave that she would forget how to sleep, just like Mom, and then it would find her anyway. It would find everybody anyway.

What had Elle said when he asked if there were more monsters? *Not yet.* He could buy everyone some time, keep it a secret at least until then. *Don't worry,* she had ordered, as if it mattered whether anyone worried or not. But it did matter. It mattered more than anything.

Nancy's hair had spilled across her face in frizzy ribbons. Lock by lock Jonathan picked it up and placed it behind her head where it belonged. She was so little all over, even her forehead was little. More weary than apprehensive, he traced her hairline by touch.

It can't get you in here. I won't let it.

Reaching her ear, he evoked a sleepy snort. That was little too. A reluctant smile sliced ticklishly across his face and healed back up again, and then he felt it: he was being watched.

"You lo—" Steve's voice cracked. He switched to a whisper, "—love her?"

Dickhead.

People weren't so bad when they were sleeping. Sleeping people minded their own business. They didn't turn blindly territorial, they didn't cringe. They didn't stare at you harder and harder to make you answer what they thought were simple questions.

Very softly, Steve cleared his throat. The warmth he was wearing singed Jonathan's eyes, so Jonathan returned to the sleeping person to comb a bit of frizz back from her temple. "Is it okay?" he said, and began to count the freckles across her nose.

Simple question, right?

It took Steve a while. Seventeen freckles.

"Yeah, I mean I guess. For now. We can duke it out tomorrow or something."

An icy breeze pushed through the knitholes in Mike's sweater. Normally the cold didn't bug him so much but it had been a really long night. He rubbed his arms. His elbow stung. His coat lay torn and useless by Steve's rear wheel in a snowfall of glass, twenty steps behind.

Trees arced up on either side of the road like spears left behind after a war between tribes of giants, and at their tops they frayed into black cracks in the navy sky. Mike walked fast for the warmth. Totally the warmth. It was only Hawkins, only the outskirts of Mirkwood. Nothing ever happened here. Har har.

He widened his eyes to let in more light—not because he was freaked out—and swept them along the sides of the road once in a while to be sure he wouldn't miss an abandoned bike. The bullets in his pocket

made warty bumps on the hip of his pants. If it was dangerous out here, if there was another Demogorgon after all, was there a way he could use them to defend himself?

—Uh, no. What was he going to do, throw them at it? Forget it. What if he hit a bullet with a rock to set it off? No, there was no way to aim it and he could lose a finger trying, and as cool as it would be to take one apart with his new knife to see what it was like inside, that was too dangerous too. *And* pretty pointless out here the dark. The moon was setting. He could only see about ten feet of road ahead of him.

Mike got his knife from his back pocket and carried it with the blade out.

What if—like, tomorrow—Lucas shot one if the bullets from his wrist rocket? Just to see what would happen? Dustin would lose his mind, at least until Will came up with a safety plan. Mike counted five bullets by touch. They needed a wide berth and a big wall. The quarry had both.

Cool. He patted his pocket. Elle's letter crinkled.

mike i care snow ball no place like home not safe bad men secret

She wasn't a murderer, she couldn't be, she had just been confused and mad. How was she supposed to know that *this* time, the bad person who shot a friend with a gun wasn't as bad as the bad men? And anyway, she could have broken Carol's neck, easy—but she didn't. She didn't listen to Mike right away but she didn't kill Carol right away either. She didn't know what to do, and she *knew* that, so she waited in the middle, and that meant everything would be fine, eventually. Once it was safe to see her again. If she didn't go crazy living in the upside down first.

Bad place.

How long had those men kept her locked up?

How was she supposed to know *anything*?

Mike played around in his pocket and reserved two bullets for the

quarry. The rest could go into that stupid Power and Light lab, followed by a ton of rocks. It was abandoned anyway. Not that he cared whether he hurt someone, he just didn't want to get caught. The Demogorgon could turn every one of those people into worm food for all he cared. Bastards.

Bad men, she had said, on the bloody school floor, in the wrong arms, with two black eyes.

Yes, yes, it's your Papa. The guy hadn't even heard her right, he was so full of himself. They were all so full of themselves.

Although Mike remembered that old man a lot, he had only figured out two things about him for sure: that he hurt Eleven, and that he lied to her about it. The more Mike thought about that the less sure he was which of the two things, the hurting her or the lying about it, was worse. He hadn't gotten a chance to ask Elle what she thought but that was probably for the best. Mike wouldn't want to talk about it either.

The important thing, the thing that stopped the cruel air pushing so hard through his sweater and made his lungs feel three times bigger, was that the lies hadn't stuck. That old man would never boss her around again. And when Eleven reached out to Mike instead, when she really proved it, the man had glanced up at him wearing a slackjawed look worse than Dustin's after rolling three natural ones in a row, like he was crapping his pants in fear.

Mike.

When Mike thought about the man, he lingered on that look the longest. It was the look you got when you knew you'd lost a campaign but still hoped the DM magically wouldn't say anything about it. It was one of his favorites.

'Mike.'

Mike's heel scuffed the ground. Her voice had come from outside his head, from everywhere, muted and echoing at the same time, as if the trees themselves were talking.

"Mike."

The breeze puffed. Frayed branches clattered overhead. All of Mike's limbs wanted to fly off in opposite directions and spread out in a search party. "Eleven?"

"No. Just Elle. Not Eleven."

She was right here. *Somewhere* right here. "Elle?"

"I'm in a hole," said a trunk three trees back. It was just a little hole, smaller than Mike's hand and totally black inside. He put his eye to it and got blinded by a sudden golden light from the end of the tunnel. "Hi Mike."

"Hi." Mike forced himself to stare into the flashlight so he wouldn't miss anything, but then it clicked off, leaving a green circle tattooed on his night vision. He casually stabbed his knife into the tree over and over, *tuk tuk*. "Did you make this hole?"

"Yes," came Elle's voice from the darkness.

He turned the tip of the knife in the tree, grinding the point in between chunks of bark, trying to dig her out. "Can you make it bigger?"

"No."

Wrecking his new knife like a total moron, Mike pried a big scab of bark off the tree near the edge of the hole, and then got to work chipping more pale bits of wood away. You couldn't dig a hole through a tree using a folding knife, but here he was, trying his hardest anyway. Elle was turning him into a stupid idiot just by existing. "How'd you do it?"

"Worms."

Mike saw the writhing black nest inside Barbara's mouth. He held his knife in a two-handed grip above the wood he had uncovered and started carving a line to distract himself. "From bodies?"

"Yes."

Elle's voice still sounded like it was coming from far away, and yet the tree trunk was only a foot deep. Mike leaned over and looked around it to make absolute sure she wasn't there on the other side. The trick of physics persisted, duh. He was getting dumber by the second. "I can't see you," he said. "Could you turn on your light again?"

"You'll get scared."

"I will not. It's just you." Three weeks ago, Mike had tagged along with Will to the pet store to get a bag of dog food. He wandered off alone—he did that a lot now—and for a split second he thought he saw Elle's eyes through the glass at the back of the store, in one of the puppies. It made him feel bad. She wasn't a dog. But now, sometimes, when he thought of her, he saw the puppy instead. "It would be cool if I could see you, that's all."

"Not pretty."

"You shouldn't say that." Mike had carved two vertical lines by now, so he started making a little 'v' to link their tops together. "It's not true."

"Pretty bad. Pretty ugly. Pretty scary." *Sniff.* "Pretty messed up."

"You really shouldn't say that, especially if you won't let me see for myself." He started another vertical line. "That's not fair."

Elle clicked her light on. Aimed elsewhere, it lit her smudged, sallow face softly in ambient light. Mike shook his hair out of his eyes. Through the round hole she looked like a moon, a dirty, pale, exhausted moon. Her brown eyes were nothing like a puppy's, and not just because the sockets around them had gone dark again—they were too shiny, too grown up. Too pretty.

"You need a bath," Mike said.

"I hate the bath."

It made sense. Mike nodded bobbily. "I would too." The tree said 'M F,' and he found he was afraid to finish the last line. What would he do with himself then? He carved along the other strokes,

deepening their grooves. "Where do you sleep?"

"Will's."

"Do you have enough food?"

"Yes."

"When are you coming back?"

"I'm not."

Mike's knife slipped. He looked up at Elle and back down at his carved letters and back up again a bunch of times. "Says who?" he finally demanded, gouging the last line to finish the E.

"Says... Says me." Elle's voice sounded dusty. "They'll come. I hurt people too. I'm like them."

Mike scowled at her instead of yelling at her. "You're not like them." She swayed a little, as if she was a leaf and Mike was a breeze. "They hurt you and lied about it. Sure you can hurt people, but you never lied to us about it. Lying about it is way worse."

"I suck at lying." Elle looked down and sighed through her nose, her eyebrows tense and unhappy. "I suck at hiding."

So she had definitely heard him talking to Will at his window. Mike opened his mouth to say *I didn't mean it*, but that wasn't true. *I was wrong*, and *No you don't*, weren't true either. "You'll get better at it," he settled.

And then Mike's carving began to stretch upward, in a way that should have been impossible: the hole was closing. Of course Elle couldn't hold it open forever. She looked drained enough to faint already.

He held his breath on an idea, a big dumb idea that he knew he would punch himself for not saying unless he said it right now. "There's an upside down version of my house too, right? Why don't you come sleep at my house?"

"No." She still wouldn't look up. "Too big. Too quiet."

"So you stay at Will's?"

"Yes. It's loud."

"Loud?"

"Yes."

"You mean music? You can hear people from the upside down?"

"Yes. But—" She shook her head stiffly. "No."

Mike could barely see both of her eyes at the same time through the closing hole. "You don't know what you mean?" Impatience reared up. "That's stupid."

"Mike," she choked. Her wet eyes dripped. Mike was a total jerk. He pinched himself on the arm again.

"Just tell me. Tell me what's 'loud.' I'll put it in my house so you can come over."

"Mike."

"Elle. Friends tell the truth." *Don't cry, please don't cry.* He wished he could pinch her too. *Just stop crying.*

"Love is loud."

"Game night!" The idea had burst out before Mike could think, let alone blush. "Come to game night. We love game night."

"Game night is loud?"

"Oh yeah, sometimes it's so loud we get in trouble. Though it's more like game day. We usually start at eleven, on Sundays."

"Eleven."

"Yeah! Easy to remember. You still have my watch, right?"

"Yes."

"It still works?"

Elle shifted, rustling, becoming nothing but a pinpoint of forehead, then a pinpoint of pink hat, through the tree. "Yes."

"See where it says T-H-U? When it says S-U-N, and one-one-zero-zero, be in my basement. Understand?"

'Yes.'

The gate closed.

Mike was still deciding whether to put a plus sign between the stretched *M* and *E* when a pair of headlights turned onto the far end of the road. He turned back to his work, finished it and admired his new landmark in the dim night, memorizing it and everything around it so that he would be able to find it again later: the spaces between trees, the pattern of the edge where the road met the grass. *M + E*.

Tires crunched bits of debris in the distance. Mike jogged for the sheriff's truck so it wouldn't look like he had been standing anywhere special. He waved his arms over his head, air traffic control guiding the grownup in, then realized he still had his knife in his hand and hurried it back into his pocket.

"He's inside!" he called out, "Jonathan came back! He's okay, he's in the house!"

The hi-beams flashed once, twice: not a flicker, a signal. A huge figure loomed over the steering wheel—that was Hopper all right. But the smaller one, in the front passenger seat, was too tall to be Will. She was beating her palms on the dashboard and ranting, her voice rushed and rising. "*—hear me you stop this car this minute. I don't CARE how far! Just let me out God damn it—*"

The crunching slowed. Mike squinted, baring his teeth. The passenger door opened before the truck stopped, and when Will's mom came out, tripping toward him in a brown coat and a striped bathrobe, she didn't bother closing it behind her.

She grappled at Mike, trying to shake his hand wherever hers happened to land, staring out over his head toward Nicole's house with her eyes full of ghosts. "Thank you," she whispered, chattering. She dragged Mike down the road a few steps, shaking his elbow and the top of his head, before she noticed herself and pushed him back to the spot from which she had taken him. She held his face in her icy hands and drilled her gaze eerily into his, and found her voice: "Thank you."

And off she went.

"I didn't do it though," Mike said, but there was no way she heard him. Watching the white soles of her sneakers flapping up in tandem behind her, he promised himself and whoever else might be listening that he would never, ever put that look on his own mother's face.

Shit. But Nancy? She might.

"What the hell took you so long?" he shouted at the truck. "Did you stop at McDonald's on the way here?"

Mike had never seen a bear stand up in real life but he remembered one in black and white, a hazy old clip from before his dad got the new TV. The bear had reared up onto its hind legs and just... stood there, looming over the camera, its snarl twitching, until the hunter dropped his gun and ran. When Hopper got out of the truck it was exactly like that.

"Are you *yelling* at me?"

"Uh. No. No sir. It's just that. Nancy's hurt. And El—" *secret*

"And what?"

"And. Uh, and El everybody's pretty freaked out, heh."

"Is that what you were about to say?"

"... Yes?"

The Chief of Police drummed his fingers on the roof of the truck.

"Eleven. She's in the upside down."

"I know."

"You know?"

"I know."

"I didn't mention that part!" Will called from the back seat.

"Get in. Talk to me."

16. sixteen

16.

Jonathan heard something.

"Mom?" Only after he said it did he really pick out the desperate whimper, the struggle to breathe through a sprinting panic, the same sound she made that night he nearly hit her with the car. *The wall, it came OUT of the WALL Jonathan it didn't have— it didn't have—*

The door slammed open. Plaster crumbled.

Mom.

Jonathan limped on all fours over the obstacle course of other people's legs, narrowly missing Nancy's bloody bandage. When he got to the end of it his mother was there, fallen to her knees and scooping him up with a strength that could flip cars. "I knew it," she squeaked, holding him like she'd just won the biggest prize on the midway. "I knew it, I *knew* it! Damn it, *damn* it I knew it! I'm so sorry honey, I knew it and I left you alone."

"Oh well," Jonathan croaked. "I was asking for it."

His mom laughed a little, then held her breath and froze still.

"She's just asleep," Steve said. "Nicole gave her... something."

"I don't believe this. How did Nancy get a gun?"

Jonathan didn't hesitate in dread for long. Better the truth came out now, while his mom was still happy to see him. "I stole it from Dad," he told her big brown coat button, the same button he used to chew on a very long time ago.

"Well that was a stupid thing to do," she replied, resting her chin on

the top of his head.

"Yeah."

Jonathan had come to sit hunched over in his mother's lap in front of how-many-people from school, but when he looked up he found that nobody cared. Tommy and Carol sat solemnly on the sofa, heads bowed like it was a pew, and Nicole, hidden behind a short curtain of red hair, had begun scrubbing the carpet near a bookcase.

"...And I know all about stupid things to do," Mom growled. Her bathrobe pocket rattled: pills in a bottle. "To hell with these."

The dread of a second ago was nothing. Jonathan fought his way out of her arms. "Mom, you need those."

"What I need is to listen to my gut, that's what I need. I am such an *idiot*. If I'd had these to hide behind when Will was missing he could be dead now. And you—" Her chin bobbed, "Jonathan, tonight..."

"So now what? What are you going to do? Stay up every night doing laps around the house, thinking in circles until you get so scared it drives you crazy? Like actually crazy?" The cuts in Jonathan's throat were still making him hoarse, but the pain of it seemed very far away. "That's how you're going to protect us?"

His mom stared at him angrily, thinking, then called, "All right, everybody out." Nicole kept scrubbing. Tommy and Carol looked at her but didn't move. "That means you, you and you, outside."

"This is *my house*," Nicole said. "I live here."

"You think any of you deserve a place to live after what you did tonight? *Get out.*"

Nicole threw down her scrubbing brush. The three exited single file. Nicole slammed the door behind her, and a little more plaster crumbled somewhere in the wall.

Jonathan's mom took him by the shoulders. "I am afraid of something *real*," she said. "I need my fear. It's how I know when something is wrong. I will work with it. And if I can't sleep at all at first, that's

fine! I'll stay up until I faint, or I'll take little naps." Gingerly, she moved Jonathan off her lap and got to her feet. "I'll learn to sleep with my eyes open." She slipped away to the kitchen. "And don't you worry about work, I can do that job with my eyes *closed*."

Jonathan wanted to yell after her, could feel that elusive roar building in his chest but it wouldn't come out. It never did when he really needed it to. "And what about the night terrors, are they coming back now? Remember why you got those pills?" He dragged himself under the archway and found her leaning on the kitchen counter, orange pill bottle in hand. "You're going to start running in your sleep again, Mom! What happens if we don't hear you messing with the door one time? You could wake up in the woods—or in traffic, or—" *It'll find you.*

"So I'll tie my shoelaces together!" She plucked an empty beer can from the kitchen sink and tossed it aside. "I don't care! These—these—" She wrestled the lid off the bottle. "*These things* are not helping *anyone*."

"Mom!"

The sleeping pills crashed a hailstorm into the sink.

"I will figure it out as I go," she said, running the tap and sweeping her hands around to wash fifty dollars down the drain. "That's what I've always done, and it has kept all of our heads above water most of the time, and that has been good enough. Barely, I know, but good enough."

Jonathan had nothing more to say. He sulked at his knee, defeated.

"If you want me to rest easy, stop hiding things from me. Whatever it is next time, and the next time, I can handle it. Knowing is always better than not knowing. There is *nothing* worse than—"

"Secrets," Jonathan mumbled numbly.

"—secrets. Right. Please take it to heart this time. If I can trust you, I can sleep."

An engine had been idling outside. Jonathan noticed because at that

moment it turned off, giving way to two inarticulate voices: Chief Hopper's level grumble, and Nicole's few dwindling yelps of defiance.

Nicole came back inside. Hopper ducked in after her. His dishevelled plainclothes made him seem more wildly threatening than official. He stared her down, waiting.

She found her camera beside the sofa, opened the back and pulled out the flim in a long, arcing ribbon, then turned around, her flushed cheeks shining, and made a big show of throwing the film on the ground and stomping on it. When the door slammed behind her again the walls didn't just crumble, they groaned. Whatever had been on that film, Jonathan felt for her—a little bit.

"Broke into a house with a gun down the back of your pants," Hopper mumbled, his steps heavy. "The hell were you thinking? You need training, a license, a holster for God sakes..." Filling the hallway like a cork in a bottletop, he crouched by Steve and Nancy. "How's she doing?"

"Not bleeding to death," Steve replied.

"I hear Byers coughed up a bug tonight."

Steve snorted. "A bug, sure."

"Show me."

"I'm afraid to move her."

"Joyce," Hopper said softly, and she rushed over.

The Chief lifted Nancy up and tipped her over into Mom's lap. Nancy made a few little pained noises without waking, and once she was settled, Steve led the way to the basement. Mom stroked Nancy's head and called her a "Silly girl, you silly girl. You silly, brilliant, unbelievable girl."

Hopper blurted out a cuss word downstairs. Jonathan felt acutely mortified, as if Hopper and Steve were inspecting a beast he had created himself, a true part of him, his ugliest and most vulnerable part.

"They kicked me out of my own house." Nicole punted one of the garden's wooden candy canes, bending it back and leaving a faint shoepoint on it. "As if I don't deserve a house. Everybody deserves a house."

"You're right, you do deserve a house," Mike said. "The Big House."

Will snorfled.

Hopper came outside carrying a pillowcase, using it as a bag like a trick-or-treater. The thing inside it was still moving. And leaking. He was also carrying a drowsy-looking Nancy bundled up in Will's blanket, which was a really good thing since if Steve had been carrying her he would have dropped her on the ground.

"Holy fuh..." Steve said, gaping at his car. "Tommy you fuh. The window too? You fuh."

Tommy had his arm around Carol's waist. "I said I'd cover the tires but don't ask me about the window. I had nothing to do with that."

Mike felt eyes on him like the heat of a spotlight. "It was an emergency!"

"You'll pay for the window too," Hopper said. He placed Nancy in the back seat of the truck and left the door open. "No insurance, no paper trail, no charges. The johns at the station could use a deep cleaning once a week if you're short on cash."

Mike turned to Will to share a grin at the retard's expense, but Will had already run off to welcome Jonathan back to the rightside-up. The Byers stood at the foot of the steps as one lumpy body made of three people hugging in relief, until Jonathan fell back to lean on the railing, hacking and choking. His mom busied herself draping her coat over his shivering shoulders.

The Byers family had weird luck, Mike thought. The next thing to happen to them would either be a missing mom or a winning lottery ticket. Maybe both. He yawned deeply. When he could see again, Hopper had taken Will's mom by an elbow and was leading her

around to the side of the house.

Mike checked Nancy by instinct. She raised her eyebrows and poked her nose at him in a moment of lucidity: *Go!*

He ran on tiptoes across the lawn and put his back to the wall by the corner, a classic spy.

"Joyce, can you drive right now?" rumbled Hopper. "Say you really had to. Because you do."

"Are you kidding? I haven't been this awake in three weeks."

"I need you to cut through the woods. Mike knows the best route. Leave him and Will at your place for now, bring the car around, take Nancy and the other girl to emergency and coach them best you can on the way there. Here's how it went: they were being stupid playing around with the gun in the woods, got in a scuffle and it got out of hand accidentally. No fault. You heard the shot, came to the rescue and that's it. Steve smells like a good enough liar so you bring him along too, let him do a lot of the talking, but stave off all the questions you can. Get a hold of the Wheelers before the docs do, let them know their kids' situation and I'll talk to them soon. Tie it all up nice. Nice and simple. Can you do that for me?"

"But where are you going? I mean, Jonathan—Did you *look* at him? He needs—"

"Jonathan is coming with me."

"With you *where*?"

There was a long silence. Mike peeked around the corner. Hopper stood a few yards away in the yellow light from a window, gazing up at it over Will's mom's head. "A facility," he finally said. "I can't tell you more than that."

"Excuse me? What, the—the feds? Are you insane? You think I'd ever let my son anywhere near those— those—No." She laughed wild and quiet as she flailed, pushing the weight of his plans off her shoulders. "No. You are high. You are drunk and high. You are blitzed out of your mind on your Tuenal—Oh I'm sorry, your 'Tylenol'—and cheap

beer."

"Joyce, I need you to okay this. He needs you to okay this. The damn bug's got its teeth on the outside. This is not something I'd trust an average med student to handle. You think I'd let anything happen to him? I don't throw kids to the wolves, it's not really my thing."

"Oh? It's not? Really? No kids? No kids thrown to the wolves, not ever? Not once?" She whispered, but it was loud enough to hear anyway: "No little bald girls?"

Hopper humped, paused, then pulled something like a bracelet off his wrist: a blue braided cord, and he played with it in his hands for a second as if it had feelings.

"Here." He took her arm and slipped the cord around her hand. "I know it's not much but it's all I have. This is a promise. Joyce! Take it. Take it." He ducked into her line of sight and held fast. "Watch over it for me. We'll be back in a few hours. Then we trade back. Do you follow me?"

She looked both angry and heartbroken. "I..."

"Sarah made this for me. It is all I have. Do you follow?"

"I know. Alright. I'll—but—"

"Two hours. Three at the most. For all we know he'll be in his bed by the time you get home. That's what I'm shooting for."

"You... still have the key?"

"I still have the key."

"Then put him on the sofa. He's grounded from his room for the next week."

"... Grounded *from* his room?"

"That's what I said." Her tone lost some of its edge. "Grounded from his room. No bedroom, one week."

"That's..."

"Appropriate. I know."

Once Jonathan fell into the front passenger seat of the Sheriff's truck, everybody huddled around the open door: Mom, Will, Mike, Steve, even Nancy on one foot, held upright in Steve's arms. As suffocating as it was to be so surrounded, Jonathan didn't want to leave. This couldn't be as bad as wherever he was about to go.

When Hopper closed the door, parting the small group only temporarily, Jonathan thought of a coffin lid, then a guillotine. *Any last words?* "It's bigger than we thought," he said. "Be careful." *But not too careful. Actually I take it back. Don't think about it at all. Forget anything ever happened.*

Nancy's eyes were sleepy, her smile weak but conspiratorial. "So we fight back."

Jonathan slumped. Why did he bother talking? He would be better off eating staples. "We can't fight back," he muttered.

"Wanna bet?" Steve challenged. Totally unconvincing, and he looked like he knew it.

Jonathan's mother leaned into the dark cab to kiss him on the head and stayed there.

"He won't leave my sight," Hopper said. He reached over Jonathan's knees and started rolling up the window.

Mom whispered a tiny *love you* and ducked out, and then they were moving. Will waved in the rearview mirror and dwindled away.

"You must have put that little girl through hell, almost dying in front of her," was the first thing Hopper said, a few minutes into the drive. His tone was emotionless but intense, hot and cold at the same time. "Ever thought about what it might be like to watch somebody dying in front of you? Somebody innocent?"

The dashboard clock ticked over. 3:04. A shock of pine branches

bleached white in the headlights and swept off to the side.

"You say that like she's not innocent."

"In her mind she isn't. You don't know what she's been through."

"I do, actually. She told me some stuff."

"Oh, she did? And so, what, you're her friend now?"

"Something like that, yah."

"Well... good."

3:05

The truck turned onto the highway. Jonathan closed his eyes for a while.

Get up! Get up! What is wrong with you?

He startled awake and almost laughed but couldn't quite remember why. Elle was on his mind again, a bright spot in a navy swamp. "I don't think pink is the best color for hiding out in a blue environment," he said. "Just saying."

"She's still wearing that crappy old coat?" Hopper pinched his temples and dragged his hand down his face. "I've left her three black ones by now. Is she building a fort out of them?"

3:08

"Where are you taking me?"

"Like I told you, a facility."

"What for?"

"A checkup for you and a—whatever that is," Hopper thumbed over his shoulder at the source of the rustling noises in the back seat, "for them."

Them.

"You work for them now?"

"Yes and no." Hopper scratched his head and tapped the side of his nose. "Think of it this way: I'm a double agent with a curse. The curse is, everybody knows I'm a double agent."

"I didn't know."

"They know and your mother knows. I tell them what I have to. I tell her what I can." The Chief pushed in the console's cigarette lighter to start it warming up. "They've got me drugged and bugged but I'm used to the drugs and I found all the bugs."

How drugged? Jonathan played with the door handle, watched the trees slide by in the dark and wondered whether he would survive a jump-and-roll at this speed. *Because just now you sounded like a lunatic.* And at that, the only thing he wanted was to get out of Hawkins. "We need to move away. All of us. Elle, and my family, and Nancy's family. We'll find somewhere else to live. Anywhere would be better than here. I can save up and once I get into college—"

Hopper laughed, an eerie tee-hee-hee. "You are going nowhere. Hell, I'm pushing the boundary right now. Anyone you know tells you about plans to skip town, you find an excuse to advise against it and if that doesn't work, you talk to me."

Jonathan slid down the seat until the seatbelt cut into his neck. He didn't have the energy to get really angry, and so his protest was a formality: "You can't do that."

"I'm not doing it. If it was up to me there'd be a full evacuation. Hawkins, Cartersville too even. But that's not how it is." The dashboard lighter popped out an inch, ready. The Chief took his time pulling a cigarette from his breast pocket and lighting it.

Jonathan coughed involuntarily at the first sight of smoke. Hopper glanced from the road to his cigarette, reached toward the ashtray to put it out, then jolted back at the last second. He took a long hands-free drag and cracked his window open instead. "They don't know how far this thing spreads," he explained quietly, smoke patting out with his syllables. "Whether it's contagious, whether it follows people."

What they do know is that the doorway's in our backyard, and that makes us a threat by association. You ever heard of a soft quarantine?"

"No."

"Think quarantine plus gag order. Means nobody knows they're quarantined. Prevents mass panic."

Jonathan perked up at that word, *panic*. Had they figured it out too? "Why are they so worried about mass panic?"

Smoke curled out of the Chief's nostrils, dragonlike. He shot Jonathan a quizzical side-eye. "Because mass panic is bad?"

"R-right." Jonathan studied his hands. They looked like they belonged to someone else. "Right."

"Here's how Soft-Q works. You try to get out, they'll sabotage you a little but not so much you'll notice. SAT scores lost in the mail, stuff like that. If bad luck doesn't work, they find you. Carbon monoxide leak in your dorm room maybe, or they take you into custody so you can help them test the boundaries of the human mind."

Is that what they're doing to you? Jonathan thought, but he said: "They can't keep track of so many people."

"They're keeping closer track of some than others. Top of the list is anyone who's been in direct contact and anyone who's got a bad habit of asking too many questions. That means me, that means Byers, that means Wheeler and a few more. Plus all public services."

"How much of this does my mom know?"

"All of it."

And half an hour ago *she* was going on about honesty?

"But she doesn't know about the kid in pink, and you'll help me keep it that way."

So, what, Hopper was going to leave Eleven to rot on the other side?

Just because? While lecturing Jonathan about not understanding what it was like to be in her shoes? "Oh yah? Why should I keep it that way? Because you said so? You keep all the secrets and you make all the rules? My mom still talks about her." *If there's no body, she's not dead. That is a FACT, Jonathan.* "You want me to start lying?"

"Yeah, I am asking you to start lying, because if you don't, your mother'll try to go in and get her. And then either some of us or all of us are..." Hopper checked his mirrors and changed lanes without using his turn signal. "I would tell you more if I could. I wish I could but it could get more than just me killed. The problem you have with me goes all the way up the ladder, understand? There are a lot of eyes on this town, eyes that make stupid pointless rules like you wouldn't believe, and none of those eyes exist, which means they can do whatever the hell they want. You need to hide from them whenever you can and so does everyone else, especially that girl. We clear?"

Jonathan balled his mom's jacket up between his neck and his shoulder. A moment of anger had left him barely able to hold his head up. "Yeah."

The window was cool on the side of his head. He remembered switching his pillows out at his bedroom windowsill earlier that night, and dreamt he was back in the upside down, but this time he was alone. He had eaten Eleven. She was trapped in his belly and there was no one left to talk to about it.

Jonathan awoke to a heavy *ka-chunk*, and the squeak of his door opening. The engine was off. Freezing air seeped into the cab. Hopper reached in and slapped a cold handcuff onto his wrist.

"Wuh—" The hell? "I never said I wouldn't go."

"I'm not making sure you go in there." Hopper closed the other cuff around his own wrist, *crik*. "I'm making sure you come out again."

It was pointless for Jonathan to change his mind now that he was handcuffed to a man the size of a train car, but the change had come on its own. He curled up where he sat, his feet on the seat and his forehead to his knees again, his throat raw and his aching insides

awash in a returning tide of terror. He checked whether the keys were still in the ignition. They weren't. "No," he said.

"You can't walk?"

The scratching noises in the back seat grew from interested to excited.

"I don't know."

Hopper got shorter in Jonathan's peripheral and crouched beside him. "...You think they'll shoot you in the head like they did to Benny?"

"I don't know," *or forget me in a cell, or cut me up while I'm awake, or put that thing back inside me just to see what happens.* One arm dangled lamely out the open door between Jonathan's shoulder and a little chain, an easily broken chain. He tried to put his feet back on the floor but they wouldn't go. "I can't move."

The monster in the pillowcase was going haywire.

Hopper spoke slowly: "They're not going to shoot you in the head like Benny. The folks who shot Benny, chased the kids, hassled me and your mother, they were panicking. They were in deep shit and they were panicking, and now they're gone. These people, working the night shift in this building?" He waited until Jonathan looked up. The facility was just a cement shack, standing in a six-car lot with a fence around it. "The people in this building have next to nothing on the line. They're science guys, just grunts doing their jobs. That means they're honest, they're predictable and they're boring. And they need me. The worst they can do is tie us up in red tape for a while."

"Then—" Jonathan tugged. The anchor didn't budge. "Why this?"

"Because there's a one in a hundred chance I'm wrong, and I made a promise."

"I want this to be over."

"Me too, trust me." A heavy hand fell onto Jonathan's knee and squeezed, swaying him. "Trust me."

Jonathan decided to go somewhere else for a while. He began to walk.

He tried to go to a concert but he had never been to one before, and a few music videos weren't enough to fill in the gaps in his imagination. He ended up focusing on the gunk on his shoes, the black blood leaked from a forest of grasping limbs whose sapling had almost turned him to fertilizer.

The ground under his feet changed from dark asphalt to grey cement, then bleached tile, then shining linoleum. An elevator lurched him up and down and almost knocked him over. He descended to kindergarten, chewed on the crayons, caught trouble for staining his teeth red, got lost in the taste of wax and the texture inside his old lunch pail.

There were a lot of people around.

Sit here.

He answered closed questions. Yes, no. Yah. No.

This way.

Left, right, left, right.

Lay there.

Bright lights. He shut his eyes tight.

He would have tried going into a porno next but these weren't imaginary hands all over him, stopping him from going anywhere at all. They jabbed him way more painfully than Eleven ever did and fighting them off only brought more. Jonathan went back to Nicole's basement, where he needed to scream and couldn't breathe.

"Put him out."

Lone words rose up from a cloud of muttering. *Budget. Boss. Peritonitis.*

"Are you deaf? Debate later. Put him out. Now."

The muttering ceased. The hands eased up and vanished.

"Thank you."

There was a squeaking to Jonathan's right, and his arm got pulled around a little by the handcuff. There were busy clangs and mumbles, rolling wheels, shifting lights. He realized he didn't have a pillow and that most of his clothes were missing, so he retreated from that feeling, climbed into his own bed and gave himself a new set of headphones. Good ones. Top of the line. Discographies lined up to the end of the world.

It didn't matter what these people did to him. It was too late to do anything about anything. More monsters would come, in a week or a year. You couldn't kill fear and you couldn't hide from a psychic predator that didn't need eyes or ears. Fear was older than the dinosaurs. It was the best weapon life on Earth had to defend itself. If these things survived by sniffing it out directly, that meant they always won.

Will was only a kid. Elle was only kid. Jonathan himself was only a kid.

We're seventeen, and this? Is complete horseshit.

Somebody gave Jonathan a new gas mask.

They were going to lose. The other place would seep into the world and absorb it, and its monsters would eat up all the people, the animals and the trees, and everything would die—but they could try to slow it down. All of this was ending but if they figured out how to fight back somehow, and fought hard enough, they might not still be kids when they died.

Somebody gave Jonathan a prick in the arm.

Nancy would not still be a kid when she died.

All of this was ending, but it wasn't over y—

Author's Notes

If you liked this story, it would mean the world to me if you shared it with anyone who might like it too. Faves, follows, recommendations and support are deeply appreciated.

My twitter username is AmyVanHym. My twitter profile provides a

link where you can support me if you'd like, and also links to all my other online activities. Contact me directly with questions or whatever else via email: amyvanhym at gmail dot com.

I also draw, vid and moderate. I am amyvanhym on deviantart, vimeo, minds and practically everywhere else. On reddit, I'm amy_vanhym, where I'm the head moderator of /r/Stranger_Things, a subreddit created as an alternative to the censorship and controlling moderation found in /r/StrangerThings. Freaks and outcasts are welcome in /r/Stranger_Things. We'd love to have you!

~Amy